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On balancing creative work with advocacy

Musician and reproductive rights advocate A.J. Haynes on operating between two very different worlds, tempering your expectations, and strategies for creating a healthy space for yourself.

Can you tell me about what is happening with the clinic you work at in Louisiana?

Hope Medical Group has been a clinic since 1980. The DHH, Department of Health and Hospitals, are so nitpicky with us. Obviously, you want the Department of Health and Hospitals to do their job and to hold every kind of medical facility accountable for providing quality care, right? Well, they really scrutinize us in a lot of different ways that make it difficult for us to provide any other services. When I first started there we were able to provide a Plan B before Plan B was available over the counter. I don't think we've ever provided STD screenings. But fortunately, there are a lot of other facilities and clinics that provide those services. What I love about indie clinics, independent abortion care providers, is that we are really able to focus on what our community needs and how best to serve that.

So it's focused primarily on providing abortion.

Yes, we are an abortion care provider.

Is it true that it's the last remaining abortion clinic that's open in Louisiana?

One of the last few, yeah. In Shreveport-Bossier there actually used to be another clinic but they had to close. What's happening right now is that there is an ongoing onslaught of BS called Trap Laws relating to abortion access. All these different laws make it difficult for patients to attain access to abortion care, even though Roe vs. Wade is the law of the land. A lot of it pertains to a particular case, our upcoming case, which is the precedent of Whole Woman's Health v. Hellerstedt. Even though that is the law of the land, you have something in theory but you don't have it in practice because there are all these different barriers to access. So that's what we're dealing with.

It seems like it's been a nightmare for a lot of the Southern states dealing with these attacks on

reproductive rights.

I think of our fight and our service to our community in the same way, almost parallel to the Civil Rights movement. A lot of the hard work is being done in the deep South. I'm not saying that providers everywhere aren't experiencing these kinds of issues, because we absolutely are. So to say nightmare... I don't know. It's just more of dealing with the reality that we've inherited. We've inherited a lot of really fucked up things as a nation and even more so in Louisiana, in the deep South. We're just trying to make it work. We're providing things that people need and abortion is healthcare, period.

Do you think the intense Christianity that is embedded in a lot of the deep South has anything to do with why there's so much more pressure on reproductive rights?

Yes and no. If we really trace the anti-choice, anti-women, anti-reproductive rights rhetoric back, it didn't come from nowhere. Abortion and Christianity or religion aren't antithetical to each other at all. When we look at the rhetoric of how political parties have used abortion as an issue that gets people riled up, it's easy to see how that has been turned against people. It conflates religion with the idea that if you're a religious person, if you believe in this, then you should do XYZ. I don't think that anyone's specific spiritual or religious practice is to blame. It's how certain topics are used by people in positions of power trying to get votes. This is how really unstable, dangerous ideas gain power—because they're not questioned in and of themselves. I can't tell you the number of women that I've sat across from and they've been like, "I don't believe in this, but," and I just stop. Let's stop right there. Take a second and think about what you are basing this on. From what religious texts? If I'm going to be told this every day, I need to be informed. Why are people saying these things? And it's because they're not informed. They're manipulations of certain scriptures to serve people in positions of power. Usually dudes in the pulpit.

To serve the agenda.

It's confusing for a lot of people because there's abortion as healthcare versus this idea of abortion as a moral issue. It's complicated and it's unique to everyone's situation. All of the anti-choice rhetoric is really scary and not based on science, not based on any kind of evidence, not based on result. It's like—what can we say over and over again to make people believe what we want them to believe? And we've seen this before. This isn't anything new.

Do you find that it's hard for you to focus on your creativity while you're in the midst of dealing with all this day in and day out? Does it drain you, or does it energize you to be creative?

As an artist, I'm informed by my life, and I've been a counselor at Hope Medical Group since 2009. Almost a decade. I mean, off and on, in between I was a teacher as well, but I've always had some kind of involvement in this work and I will continue to until every person can have access to abortion. This is necessary healthcare and I'm going to continue doing this work in whatever capacity that I'm able to. So it's less that it's draining or energizing, and more that it informs my perspective, it informs my art. What I'm interested in as an artist is being a good storyteller, and someone who knows how to deal with really complicated emotions through song, performance, and art. Because sometimes words just fail us. Sometimes talking about it isn't enough.

I also think there are other ways to communicate, and that's what I've been really lucky to have gotten to explore in a position of privilege as an artist. It's just part of who I am. I'm out here celebrating my autonomy. I'm out here celebrating being a free-ass woman and that is absolutely informed by the realities of what's happening back home, which is if there is no access, there is no choice.

I can hear a lot of that in your most recent record, *Power*. I was listening to it and I can totally hear how all these things are swimming around in your mind and coming out through song.

Honestly, so much of my time on the road is spent in a van or a green room, going from dressing room to doing random radio stuff here and there. I'm pretty insulated from other real women. It's kind of fucked up. So whenever I hear from another woman, who's just living her life and she's like, "This is helpful for me," I enjoy it. I'm like, "Cool, that is more validation than any Pitchfork or Rolling Stone article or what the fuck ever." Not that I don't love that. Not that that's not really nice—they're great curated

archives and really great writing—but I need to hear from other women and other real people.

I feel the same way. That's always the stuff that has meant the most to me. Do you ever experience burnout? Do you have any rituals or methods that you use to deal with burnout?

Interestingly enough, this is the first time I've felt burnt out. It was going straight from a short US tour to the European tour and back that got me. I was like, "Okay, this is what burnout feels like. I know it now." I have to create spaces for solitude. I have to create space to check in with myself. I travel with a yoga mat at all times. I am known to whip out a yoga mat on a nasty ass green room floor. As varied and as oftentimes seemingly vacuous of an interest as yoga can be, for me, I love the act of, "Here is my time, and if I'm in the middle of a yoga pose, people aren't going to talk to me." People will leave me the fuck alone. They'll see I have this mat, I'm in my zone and people will respect that. It's a beautiful way for me to subtly tell everyone to fuck off for five minutes without having to be obtrusive. And it's also a way to be alone with myself and think—"What do I need to do better? Could I take a better tone with people? How do I communicate better?"—while being in communication with my body and my needs. I don't think that women are taught to do that. I've thankfully been taught to do that by the women in my family, but that's not been the experience of most people I know, and especially a lot of women that I encounter.

Also, I love makeup. The process of me doing my makeup is something that I make time for. And it is dealing with the exterior, but I have to look at my face, I have to make sure I got my game face on. And guess what? When you're putting on mascara, people will get out of your way.

It's very ritualistic. I've never been a heavy makeup wearer really, not daily, but just the act of spending time with yourself in front of a mirror can be like putting on armor. Especially when you're about to go on stage.

It really is. And also, part of this creative shift for me, and with this last album, was exploring the performative feminine and playing with it. That kind of play has been a grounding force. We spend a lot of our time in spaces where a lot of the times I'm the only woman of color or the only chick around. I'm in these largely masculine-identifying spaces while playing loud stuff. And so for me to have space that I create to play with what my idea of femininity is, it is really fun, you know?

What are some of the most surprising things that you've encountered or learned, either at work or as an artist or both?

What I'm always really taken aback by is how resilient and amazing people are, especially the people who I encounter at Hope. I am in awe of how they face all of these barriers and are able to do what's necessary to survive. I can't project my positivity on every experience, but for me, I think of abortion as a way to say, "No, I'm choosing me right now." Whether it's out of necessity, to stay alive, because of medical reasons, or if it's just that you're not ready to have a kid right now, or you never want to have children, abortion is a live practice of agency and autonomy, whether it's difficult and complicated or an easy decision to make. So I'm always floored by how resilient people are.

As far as the music and art/creative world goes, I have no fucking expectations because so little of it makes sense, to be honest. I'm just showing up and seeing what happens. I don't know. Two plus two equals five in this shit. I don't understand it. I don't get it. I don't have to, I just need to show up and create and try to be a nice person.

That's a really good way of looking at it though, honestly, because you are correct. It doesn't make any damn sense at all.

Nope. None of it. None of it makes sense.

My mother has always taught me to hope for the best, but prepare for the worst.

Oh, girl. Yes.

Which sort of eliminates expectations altogether from the equation if you think about it. You're just like, "I'm hoping that things are going to be good, but I know that it's possible that they won't be and

I'm going to be ready for that, whatever that is." Some people think that's kind of a cynical way of living.

Cynicism is void of positive outcome. Cynicism is void of agency.

Right. That's what I think, too. I think it's a very positive way to look at things. It's realistic.

Absolutely.

It's not like a fairy tale. I don't have rose-tinted glasses on. It's just that I'm confronting reality day to day, as is. And that's definitely what you're doing, too, and I think you're doing really important work. I'm really glad that you're out here doing this.

Yes. It's interesting going between these different worlds. There's an urgency to each and they're just very different spaces. As a counselor, going from this really intimate space with someone and being able to help them work through things and provide information that they need, versus being on the stage, which is this big platform and there're all these rituals involved that I've done to get myself ready, is wild. To go from a space where it's mostly women to another space where there's barely any.

Do you find that there's a similarity at all? In a sense, that you are in both scenarios providing a service, whether people realize and appreciate it or not?

Huh. You're right. I didn't think about it like that.

I mean, most nights you're playing to a crowd that might be predominantly male or maybe they seem disinterested or you're here to prove something to them, but you're entertaining them and you're providing a service, you're doing something that they've paid for, usually. That's just one thing that popped into my head as you were talking about how different those two things are. You're still busting your ass trying to improve the quality of life for others, I think. On one side, perhaps people are more grateful, and on the other side, maybe you can't always tell.

I've definitely had counseling sessions where I'm the last person they want to see and I'm not mad at them; that's not really for me to decide, you know? I know that I'm good at entertaining people because otherwise I wouldn't be in this position. It's really hard for me to think of myself as an entertainer. I'm always thinking of myself as a teacher, because I'm just obsessed with accountability and these more virtuous things.

Well, you contain multitudes. You're a teacher, but when you want to step on stage in front of an audience, you become an entertainer.

Very true!

A.J. Haynes Recommends

Lift Louisiana

The Rabbi Goldstein Fund

The New Orleans Abortion Fund

The Center for Reproductive Rights

Abortion Care Network

National Network of Abortion Funds

Shout Your Abortion

Abortion AF

Sister Song

Book recommendations:

The Story of Jane

Killing the Black Body

Name

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Vocation

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Dylan Glasgow Guice

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