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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3067 words.

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On how goals and expectations change along with you

Musician and educator King Britt discusses building and maintaining a community everywhere you go, teaching as a way of learning, and finding and keeping a rhythm for your creative work.

You're a musician as well as a teacher. You're also a mentor. As someone who spends a lot of time advocating for other people, how do you make sure you're not sapped of energy by the time you get to your own projects?

It's one of the first things I tell my students. When I first started getting into production, which is right after high school and going into college, I was making all these demos. I was working at Tower Records, and then also DJing. You're 19 and you think you can do anything. You have all the energy in the world, so you just do it. You don't even think about it.

In '94, my daughter was born. You have a kid, you have bills, so you have three, four irons in the fire and you're just going for it. You're really not thinking so much about time management until it overwhelms you. Then my label with Josh Wink, Ovum Recordings, was through Sony from '99 to 2002. That was during the time when electronic music was exploding here, at Amp on MTV, all these shows. What we learned, me and Josh, is how to organize time. We had to think about things in a nine to five way. In the day, we would do more paperwork, faxes, all of this stuff in the day, the red tape. And at night, it's all about the music.

But then in 2001, because I was married at the time, I also had my daughter, it was overwhelming. And so, I had to make a decision: Do I continue with the label and all of this touring, all of this? One thing has to go. When you get to that point in time in your career, you realize, I really need to get on a routine schedule, a daily routine or weekly routine, whatever it is, but you need a routine to get in a rhythm. You have to stay in rhythm. I left the label and just was 100% creative and less the business side of things.

Around Winter Music Conference 2002 maybe, 2003, I'm talking to Louie Vega. And I'm like, "Louie, dude, you have the family, you are pumping out remix after remix, you and Kenny, and also alone. How are you doing it?" We were just chilling poolside. I think it was Gilles Peterson or whatever spinning. I'm like, "Dude, how are you doing this? And he's like, "I go to the studio from 11:00 AM to 8:00 at night and that's it." That's his day as if he was going to work. He said the most important thing for him was having the studio out of the house. Going to another space. If you're able to find a separate space that you can go to, and when you come home, home is home, it really is great—because the lines are too often blurred. As you know with Zoom, everyone working at home now, these lines are blurred. When he said that, it just clicked. So I got a separate space from where I was living. It changed the game. When I'm home, it's strictly home and watching movies, whatever it is, other than music. I find that has been the best.

As far as projects are concerned, I don't take more than three projects at a time. Sometimes creatively, they bleed into one another sonically. So I might be doing Phloston Paradigm and also doing a remix. I remixed Low a couple of years ago, which was a highlight for me. At the same time I was working on a Phloston album. And so, that remix came out in that pseudonym, the Phloston Paradigm, like outer space *Blade Runner* vibes, and it worked perfectly.

Professor life changed everything. I love it. I can't believe I waited so long to do it. When I got the position, first, I never taught on this level before. So I need to really dive in and learn it all, learn

different aspects of academic life. So I put all my creative stuff on hold. But I'm so far ahead, I already had three or four projects done that were about to be released over time that it was cool. It allowed me that time.

It takes discipline to not have things bleed over. Are you pretty hard and fast with this?

I'm dead on. It's funny. I look at being a professor and teaching as part of the creative practice. I'm always the student. I learn so much from my students, because especially in electronic music production, they're coming to it just like I came to it, say, in '88 making beats, making music with my moves and all of that with no rules. You're just like this sponge. We didn't even have YouTube. We just dove in. We may not even had the manual. We just were trying to figure it out, which sparked happy accidents and made these creative decisions we probably wouldn't have made before. We had DJ Pierre in for [my course] Blacktronika. And Pierre was like, "My friend had the 303 and I just started twisting knobs and oh, it can do this sound." There's the birth of acid house. It's that simple. My students are over compressing, but it creates a sound. Same with if you look at the LA beat scene, FlyLo, Ras G, all these guys were over compressing, not really knowing how they're using these effects, but they know what they want the sound to be, and they want it to rock in the club. They're bringing that innocence and shaping it.

There's this beautiful exchange of the teacher's always the student. I don't look at it as work so much as it's part of my creative practice now. It's really changed because when you teach you're relearning. And so, my stuff's sounding better.

There's a thread through a lot of what you're talking about. This idea of creative process and creativity as a social act.

It's organic. It just cosmically happens when you're in certain spaces. Then there's a synergy. That's why I like campuses so much. Some people don't like it, but I feel that it's lots of like-minded individuals. That's where a lot of the magic sparks. A lot of great things have happened in social interaction on campuses. It's a city within a city.

Speaking of cities... One thing I was thinking about, too, is the importance of Philadelphia as a place and your own ties to it. You left to teach in California. Has that affected the way you work?

I was in Philly fifty years. I grew up in Philly. I left when I was fifty to come here to UCSD. I've been here two and a half years. Philly is always a great hub. If you need to jump to Europe, six-hour flight. If you need to go to West Coast, five-hour flight. If I need to hit Miami... So as a musician, Philly's always been a great hub and being a touring musician, I mean, you lived in Philly, that's the roots. You're traveling the world, so you're not doing day-to-day in Philly.

Right before I accepted the position here at UCSD, I was touring less and doing more production and remixes, so I was home more. And I realized my Philly's gone. The Philly International Building was destroyed, no one saved it. Luckily, they saved the John Coltrane house. Sigma Sound is gone. All of these iconic places in Philly have been, not erased, but nudged out of the cultural fabric of things. They're starting to become ghosts.

A friend of mine, Max, who has a place called Brewerytown Beats, is a preserver of Philly music and culture. He's releasing all of these records—Sounds of Liberation with Monnette Sudler... all of these great records. He's unearthing all this Philly history for the new generation, so it's beautiful to see. Drexel has a Philadelphia archive. They have all the Sigma stuff. I donated all the Sylk 130 multi-tracks. I still own them, but they'll be in the archive there. They'll digitize things for me.

It's a beautiful place for our history to grow. I'm not saying change is bad. I'm just speaking as someone who lived there fifty years, knowing all the amazing music and stuff that came out of Philly in all genres. We could go back. Of course, Coltrane lived there, Art Blakey for a bit. We can go back to jazz and American bandstand and on and on and on all these amazing musicians, Shirley Scott, all coming out of Philly, sound of Philadelphia, the birth of disco. I mean, we can go on and on all the way up to Jill Scott, Jazzy Jeff, Lil Uzi Vert, everyone recent.

You're working on a book inspired by Blacktronika. How do you imagine turning what you learned from doing the course, and your theories in general, into a book?

The book I imagine, first of all, is for everyone. It's something anyone can pick up. The book is comprised of the interviews, and also my personal association with all of these amazing artists. How I met them, or if I didn't know them personally, which is only a few so far, then what was my first introduction to them and how that worked. I really love books that have these straightforward interviews. Kind of like a magazine. I want kids to be able to read it.

There's a form of storytelling, then there's the interview, then also the history, why is that person or these people important as pioneers. For example in drum and bass, they were the first, really, to bridge the gap between breakbeat and what we call drum and bass now. Some people call it jungle, but drum and bass for me and for all of us is really the proper term. They were the bridge. So, to talk about the history of drum and bass coming out of Jamaican dub culture being brought to the UK, the whole journey and lineage of that. That's how I'm going to frame it. When you write things, physically write things, you manifest it faster and it's a therapeutic meditative process.

Years ago, I would write in a Word document, then I would transfer them to an email for myself, and I'd

email myself because then I could see it differently. I would catch things or be like, "Oh yeah, this sentence seems weird." Finding that kind of ritual is super helpful.

Ritual. Yes. Both ritual and system.

I find that I work better between other things. I like to juggle projects. I have no real interest in going to a residency for a month and only working on one thing. I've had a job since I was 13 and have just always had to make time to do creative work. So I get up earlier, write for two hours before the emails start coming in, etc. I created a system out of necessity.

One hundred per cent. I did think about going away, though. One thing I really miss, and I hope to get into that here in San Diego, is cafes. Philly, I have my café spots, Milkcrate, all these different spots, La Colombe, and I can sit, and each spot has a different vibe. I would do music in these cafes all the time. Half of my newer stuff, say the past 10 years, half of it's done in cafes, at least the beginnings of it, then I take it to the studio.

That ties into what you were saying about how your practice involves other people. It involves socializing in some form. In a public space, I can have headphones on and I'm focused, but I can look and see there's another human being in the room. Somehow, that's useful for me.

That's the energy you need sometimes. I have two albums coming out this fall, completely different and the process of those were both tremendous. The first, it's going to be titled *Tyshawn and King*. So it's Tyshawn [Sorey], legendary drummer, composer, I mean he's one of the jack of all trades. Amazing drummer and MacArthur winner. We worked with Alarm Will Sound, the orchestra out of New York.

I flew him out and two days before quarantine, we just jammed here. At the school we have an amazing studio, and amazing engineer, Andrew Munsey. We just went for it. We didn't rehearse, anything. Man, the power of this record. As someone who's done all these different albums and genres, it was so freeing not to have a conceived idea. I'm patching, I'm doing all the electronics and he's on drums. Then prepare piano, and it's like, "Whoa." We had no rules or anything. We just went for it. The end result, wow. And Heba Kadry, she mastered it. Really, I'm really proud of it, with the process of that. Then he flew out and lockdown happened.

The second project is with Chimurenga Renaissance. It's Tendai Maraire from Shabazz Palaces. It's his Zimbabwe project. I brought Shabazz to Philly for their first ever show. So, it's been like a six, seven year journey back and forth to Zimbabwe. Much different process.

I'm releasing all of these myself, on my label, The Buddy System. We want to own our masters, we like to do things ourselves, and I think, between all of us, it will get to where it needs to get.

What does a successful project look like to you?

Success for me is finishing the project and really feeling happy with the end result. I'm very good at knowing when to stop, and I have a crew of friends that I bounce things off. Even students now, there are certain students who are on the next level, right, "How do you like this?" They're bringing these super fresh ears, they're super young. A friend of mine recently was like, "It would be cool if you dropped that part out in the middle. I was like, "Oh snap." I always tell them be truthful, be honest. You're not being graded or anything. Satisfaction to me is finishing the project and being extremely happy with it. Putting it out into the world, it takes on a life of its own. Know what I mean? I have no attachment, any more, to the end result.

Back in the day, when I was younger, you're starting out in music like, "I want to blow up, I want to be in every magazine." That's when you set yourself up for a lot of disappointment, when you have these expectations. Listen, expectations are good because you need goals, especially when you're young, you need these goals to push your artistry to a higher level. When you're young it's good to have these goals that encompass a lot of other people rather than just yourself. As I grow older, it's my own goals, my own personal goals that resonate with me. It's like, "Man, I worked with Tyshawn and it's killer." If it never comes out, it's cool, but we have this machine, we have this system where we can put things out so let's do it. Who knows where it's going to go? Once you detach from it, the cosmos takes it to where it's supposed to be.

A big part of your process is being a good person. You haven't burned bridges and you have a large network of friends and community. It seems like the people you've worked with from a variety of different parts of your life, you can still work with, and you can still call on when you need to do so.

When we discuss these different movements within the Blacktronika course it always goes back to community. We were talking to Juan Atkins, Carl Craig, Waajeed and they were saying how maybe Derrick May had the 909 or 808, and Juan would have a Juno, and they would share this stuff amongst the community. This happened a lot with drum and bass, with all of these genres, because of limited resources and access. That really resonates through the class. I noticed a lot of my students, they're creating these small communities around the music they're doing. They're building these little musical ecosystems. The music is different, but the community-based organic growth of the sound is very cool.

One thing I noticed during our conversation: Obviously you're proud of the work you do, but you're open to suggestions and feedback from colleagues and students and you don't have an ego about it. When you're a person who's like, "This is the only way it happens," you're cancelling out all these other ideas and

voices, and it's harder to get people to collaborate and harder to have a community.

Absolutely. You have to be fluid. You have to flow with things. There have been certain projects I had it all kind of mapped out. It was very specific. They were very specific goals. I was also younger. There's something to be said about that, too. That worked out really well. I would say they're my biggest records commercially, and it was very intentional. Very intentional. As I got older I thought, "All right, I did that. Okay, now I'm free to do whatever I want."

King Britt Recommends:

King Britt Top 5 Influences on Creative Practice

Mediation and Gratitude: Essential ritual every morning and now evenings

Watching films: One of the most influential rituals. I love going to the movies but also embrace the online archives like Mubi/Criterion. Informs my music tremendously.

Digital digging: utilizing all online streaming platforms to constantly find new sounds, music to play and sometimes sample (sounds only)

Teaching: The beauty of being a professor is re-learning everything I know and articulating it in a way that my students can grasp, while also creating a wonderful experience. I've become a better person though teaching.

Studio: Having a studio where everything works and my creative flow is just that, flow.

Name

King Britt

Vocation

Musician and educator

Fact

Matthew Law

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