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As told to Max Freedman, 2599 words.

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On following your passions

Musician and label founder NNAMDI discusses the work that goes into improving your art, opening yourself up to collaboration, and pursuing whatever passions are calling your name.

You've touched upon all sorts of genres. How does restlessness tie into your creativity?

I'm always restless. I feel like restlessness leads to productivity because I never want to sit; that's when the demons come out, when your brain starts going to crazy places. I feel like giving myself tasks and having a goal, or just something to occupy my brain space, makes everything flow easier. Being restless is one of my least favorite feelings, so I always try to counteract that with something I can get lost in.

It sounds like creativity has always been that thing for you.

Yeah. I've always loved making things, making little videos. Even when I was little, I'd make little videos with my siblings, making songs just so we would stay out of trouble. It's evolved from something that I've done since I was very little.

You rap, you sing, you produce, and you play drums. How does learning actual music skills help you address your restlessness? How does it benefit your creative process?

My friend from Barcelona was visiting me a couple of days ago, and we were talking about pursuing passions, and pursuing things because you enjoy them, as being the primary reason you should pursue art. She was like, "That's such an American way of thinking," which I thought was very funny but also kind of true.

My family is Nigerian, so I'm first-generation, and the concept of following your passions just because it's something you enjoy is not a thing that many other countries have. People want to do things they enjoy, but it's not the main source of happiness.

You can do things you don't enjoy, you can do things you don't want to do, and the outcome is still happiness. It doesn't have to be 24/7 enjoyment. And with learning music, that's how it is. The majority of people learning music don't love learning scales. But once you know your scales, you can make so much more. You can be more expressive after you learn the basics of music theory and stuff like that.

I'm curious to hear more about this being such an American notion.

I think in every culture, people believe you should do that. But in America and Western culture, it's prioritized as the most important thing over consistency. In other cultures, earlier on, you get to know the importance of being consistent in your work, and repetition, and that you'll have to do things that aren't enjoyable to get where you want to go. If you want to do something great, if you want to do big things, you have to make sacrifices.

You're somebody whom people often describe as having a singular, out-there musical vision. How much does others' perception of you factor into your creative process?

It's just always wrong. How can other people have this perception of me when I'm constantly evolving? There's no way you can know what's going to happen or what the vision is going to be like. Hopefully, it's always unique and, hopefully, it's always organic.

People's perception of me doesn't really come into account during my artistic creations. If someone was like, "Yo, he makes this type of thing or makes this type of art," it just wouldn't make sense to me because I don't even know what I'm going to do next time. It's just based off the feeling, the time, and the environment, and those things always change.

It sounds like there's an element of unpredictability to it, but in a good way. Is there anything concrete that you have in front of you mentally when you're in creative mode? Any idea or concept or goal?

Yeah, it can be as simple as, "Oh, I saw a cool plant today. I'm going to go write about this feeling the plant gave me or write about the plant." It could be a conversation you have with a friend that inspires some more in-depth thought on a topic. It always starts from somewhere.

Sometimes, I'll just force myself and be like, "You have to write a song a day for this month." Sometimes, I'll just force it, because that's the consistency, that's the practice. If you keep practicing it, then the creativity will flow at times, and you'll have less writer's block, which I don't really believe in.

Consistency is always more important than talent. You can be so talented, but at a certain point, you're not going to get better if you're not consistently working on it. The people that work every day are going to surpass you 99% of the time.

You said you don't believe in writer's block. I would love to hear more about why you feel that way.

I believe that you write some things that are better or worse. But I don't think that there are no ideas at all. I think you just have shitty ideas sometimes. And sometimes, you have decent ideas, and sometimes, you have great ideas. I don't think there's a block. I guess what maybe some people consider a block is when they're writing ideas they don't love. But I feel like that's all part of the process.

Although you're not cracking jokes in your music most of the time, it always feels like there's a sense of humor to it. I'm curious about the value of humor in your creative process.

Life is funny. I was thinking the other day just about the idea of drums. You just have these tubes with plastic on them and you're flailing sticks around. For some reason, just thinking about that made me laugh for a long time, just how primitive and silly things are and the things we take so seriously.

There's underlying humor to just existing. A lot of times, it feels like a practical joke or a prank played by the universe. And I think there's joy and fun in everything. I think a lot of people don't like humor in music or silly music, but it's there. It's a part of life.

I was watching pop punk videos with the sound off the other day, just watching the people strum power chords in unison and their arms and their shoulders going up and down. Music is inherently funny but also beautiful at the same time. It's all those things. It's not just one thing.

Since you were just on a video set yesterday, I have to ask if any of this has influenced your music videos.

My go-to thing visually, or the thing that brings me the most joy in a show or a movie, are dark comedies. I love the humor aspect of it, but I like the unsettling feeling sometimes. I like sometimes when there's no resolution and you're just left out there lingering in some awkwardness. In my visuals, I go in that direction a lot...it's such a unique feeling of, "Oh, it's kind of silly." It's like, "Oh, I feel a little bit strange." That's my favorite genre visually.

You started Sooper Records with Sen Morimoto and Glenn Curran, so I'm curious how the quote-unquote business side of things ties into your creative vision.

With Sooper, it's all about boosting other people. For me, it's all about trying to get other people to my level, or greater than my level, [and] being a springboard for artists. In Chicago, there's not really the infrastructure for a lot of those things or people looking for local musicians. They're like, "I want to go on tour. I want to put out a record, but I don't know how to do these things," but they're still working very hard. That's what I was doing.

Before I knew a lot of this stuff [and] how it worked, I would just be making things and booking my own tours. I booked my first tour through MySpace, which is very funny, old man. [Sooper Records is for] noticing those things in other people and trying to boost them if I see that they're passionate and really want to do this thing. For me, it's still very creative. It still has to do with people being unique or special.

The goal is to just boost people in the direction they want to go. If they want to tour the world, it's like, how can we get them in that direction? If their goal is to just put out a few really good records and have neat visuals that they have a specific vision for, how do we make that happen?

It's fun to do it for other people because I feel like, when I'm doing it for myself, I'm so in my head and so absorbed that I can't take a step back and see some things critically because I'm still in it in every aspect of it. It gives me the opportunity to look at creating things through a broader lens. And it's great because Glenn does more of the emailing work and all of that stuff, and sometimes I help with other things, but I'm not good at that. It's great that we have three people that have unique ideas and traits.

What does collaboration do for your creative process?

For my solo music, I haven't been that collaborative. It's really been 90 percent me, or I'll do everything and then be like, "Hey, you come put a verse on this part," or, "Hey, I wrote this chorus, can you sing it?" The reason I make solo music is so I can have complete control because I'm a control freak. Not really, but I've been in bands since high school, and being in a band is very different.

I do love collaborating. I love hearing ideas evolve through other people. Someone suggests something and then someone is like, "What if we add this?" And they're like, "Ooh, it gets better." You come up with ideas you would never come up with on your own. That's just going to happen when you have different personalities working together.

That's such a beautiful thing because you can create something that everyone involved with loves, but no singular person could have made it. But in my solo music, I haven't dived into that as much. I think on future albums, I'll be more open to working with other people. But it's such a meditation, a therapeutic thing for me to be in the studio by myself and be making stuff. It's so therapeutic that I'll always be doing that.

What are some of the reasons you're now more open to having collaborators on your solo albums?

Just because you can make something amazing and at the end of the day, no one gives a shit if you do everything by yourself. They just care if it's good. You know what I mean?

How do you know when someone would be a good collaborator for you? What do you look for in a collaborator?

Immediate vibes. We have to have good energy when we talk and hang together. It's really more, if I don't want to be around the person, I'm not going to hang or make music with them, even if I like their music.

It would sour for me if I met someone I really wanted to work with and they were shitty. I wouldn't work with them. It's really just energy. I like people who have their own freaky ideas, who think outside of the box but want to try things.

I think the worst thing that can happen is being in a studio with people [who] shut down your ideas and not even consider them or give you a reason. I've seen that happen in studios with people and it's just like, well, this is not collaboration. This is that person's project and they're shutting you down without even being like, "No, I don't think we should do this, because this would sound better." They're just like, "No, that's dumb." I'm like, "Oh, okay."

Some creative folks have told me that some collaborations feel more transactional where it's one-and-done, but the collaborations they love the most build out long-term friendships, people you can come to time and again with ideas. How much does that sound true for you?

Sen is one of those people where we're going to make stuff in the future, and we've done a few things that haven't come out. Any time we get together and are having a fun time, sometimes, we make some music together, but it's never forced. I do understand the appeal of some business-transaction collaborations too because...if Drake was like, "Yo, let me get a verse," I'd be like, "Absolutely." But I don't think I'm going to be chilling with Drake.

It just sounds like you and Sen are hanging out and it's not even like you're intending to do something creative. It just happens.

Yeah, it's just naturally what happens because we all do it all the time. A lot of my friends are always making music. So you show up and they're like, "Oh, you want to put guitar on this? Or you want to do some vocals?"

That was everything I wanted to ask you today. But if there were any questions I asked and there were things you wanted to say that you didn't get to mention, or just anything else you wanted to say about creativity, go for it.

There's no gatekeeping on art. You don't have to have a huge background. You don't have to be musically trained to start making art. If you want to make art and you make it, then you're an artist. If you want to make music and you go and make some music, you're a musician.

Everyone that is passionate about making any music or art should make some time to do it. If you enjoy it, it can turn into a passionate thing. It can turn into a career just off something that was your passion or a hobby. Everyone should pursue the arts they're drawn to.

NNAMDI Recommends:

Burt's Bees Cucumber face wipes. They Smell great! Really good to have if you're feeling a bit grimey, maybe you were out at the beach or biking down a trail and you feel an extra layer of grit when you're done. They Always leave my face feeling clean and fresh.

Pineapple Spindrifit. It's just one of my all time favorite drinks. Sparkling water w low carbs and the Slightest sweetness. Throw it in the freezer for like 15 minutes until it almost starts to slush. It hits all the spots. Very refreshing. Just don't forget you put it in the freezer like me. Smdh. Set a timer.

Zeyar Paint pens. Great to have around if you have a sketchbook. I'm not a painter and it's easier for me to use these than a brush. In your free time you can Make some fun lil paintings.

Crocs. They are cozy. Also so easy to put on. I used to be a hater but now I've fully converted to the dark side.

Portable phone charger. If you carry a purse or bag around this is always great to have. I like to live on the edge, phone in the red on 5 percent when I leave the house so you never know when your gonna be saving yours or someone else's ass.

Name
NNAMDI

Vocation
musician, label founder

Fact

Dennis Elliott

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1