

On creating opportunities for yourself and others



Musician and multimedia artist Dawn Richard on making yourself accessible as people engage with your art, uplifting your community, and maintaining your style as you move among collaborators.

June 28, 2023 -

As told to Max Freedman, 2658 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Art](#), [Adversity](#), [Business](#), [Collaboration](#), [Identity](#).

Your recent NYU residency [October 17-21, 2022] included a panel with the writer [Marcus J. Moore](#), a party, and a live show where you're debuting your new album *Pigments*. This all makes me wonder how interacting with other people after you've already created your work ties into the creative experience for you.

My choices sometimes surprise the people who follow me, so it's great to have these moments where they can ask me questions like, "Why do I shift this way?" "Why these musical choices?" "What are these lyrics?" "What are these eggs you're dropping?"

The people who follow me are also artists, innovators, graphic designers, animators, and visual visionaries who are creating paths through their own journeys, and they want to learn and speak among each other. This gives me an opportunity to not only provide that but grow with them.

These moments are imperative. I try to do them in all my projects in some way, shape, or form. If I perform, after the show, I'll spend hours just talking to people.

So it's less like you have the audience in mind when you're creating and more like, you might learn from the people who are engaging with you?

It's a bit of both. When I first go into my projects, I want to learn from myself. I want to see how far I can push my possibilities and feed the artist in me that has always loved some of these spaces that I've always felt like, as a Black woman, I always wanted to explore but was maybe afraid because no one would see me in that space. But I'm so much more mature now and the fear of being myself doesn't exist. I just want to go for it now.

The people who follow my career are just as hungry, so they'll have questions. I'm lucky enough to be able to say, "Okay, these are the reasons I moved this way. What about you? Why? What do you see when you listen and hear?" That's what art should be.

When you go to a museum, everybody's not going to love the same painting. The purpose of going to the museum is to see what defines those moments for them. And then, if you're lucky and the artist is there, or if there are people who can teach you or tell you where the perspective comes from, you can have that discussion.

That's what the residency is. It's an opportunity for people to not only see the art and listen to the art but also speak to the artists who created it and then have their own interpretation of what that makes them feel.

What you're saying brings to mind the work you do with Adult Swim, where you're a consultant who brings more Black voices to the network. Can you talk more about your motivating force behind that?

It's my most rewarding [work]. I'm figuring out how to move as many people who have been undervalued as possible and give them platforms to shine. It has been my honor to bring diversity and beauty, whether it's gender, sexuality, whatever it may be, color, race. We are bridging the gap and breaking ceilings.

I've been able to do it and have it not be about me and instead be more about these incredible creatives who want their voices heard. Sometimes, these contracts that we do with these young animators are their first opportunities in the animation workforce. This is their first time really being able to animate at this scale.

That has been a beautiful conversation and really pushing storytelling, and making sure that not only the animators are Black or people of color or queer, but also the musicians that are a part of the project, so that everyone across the board is people who look and sound like me or us.

Where do politics and creativity intersect for you?

Nina Simone has said an artist should reflect how the times are. I'm always rooting for people who are undervalued, unseen, who have felt like their voices were stifled. I've felt that. I've lived that. It's been imperative for me to speak on those things and be intentional and purposeful with the way in which that message is put across.

I've never been preachy with political issues on my projects, but I've never shied away from speaking of those matters within my records, like Black crimes on Redemption or speaking about the realities of what it means to be a Black woman in the industry, and how I've had to be a warrior and sometimes felt like Goliath, having a record on Goldenheart speaking on that.

Politics definitely plays a part in music, and those who have the power, I don't think they should be *forced* to speak of it. But I admire a true artist who has understood the power of that and what it means to have that kind of platform. I always applaud the artist that doesn't mind speaking of those social issues and applying them for change. I always want to be an artist that reflects what Nina spoke of. I thought that was powerful, and I'll always have that with me.

Just because someone speaks on social issues doesn't make them an activist, but I tend to gravitate to artists like that because I think it's reflective of where we are. It's important that we have those voices to speak of the matter because people need healing. It is therapy to be able to speak of what is going on because most people don't have avenues to speak on those issues. Music is the biggest and largest platform for them to see themselves in. Not just music, but art in general.

Beyond music, you run the food truck Papa Ted's. How has that fulfilled your creative needs?

It was about being intentional and consistent with my message and what I wanted from myself. I'd always wanted to create a business at home. I wanted whoever worked as my employees to be from New Orleans. I wanted to pour money back into the city.

I also wanted to bring something that was limited in New Orleans, because it's still something that is fairly new, veganism and eating healthy, especially within the South. I was trying to incorporate something local to my city, but also having a creative hub for artists to network.

It was a no-brainer to do something like Papa Ted's, which is an opportunity for artists to paint with plant-based paint, for us to sell that art online for them to make money. I don't take any of those proceeds. Whatever people bid on, that's all theirs. [While you're there,] all the products are biodegradable and recyclable. The food is all organic and vegan.

The premise behind it is to create a space that's eco-friendly while giving creatives an opportunity to network. It's been two years, and it's lovely, and it has been something that has brought some light to my career in a different way. I collaborated with Adult Swim and Papa Ted's to have three beautiful murals around the city that are all sustainable, that speak to New Orleans culture, but also got all local artists paid beautifully and seen on a way larger scale.

Clearly, what you do is not only for your creativity but also for others'. Can you talk more about why?

The pay-it-forward approach is important to me. I was rejected countless times in this industry. So many people were like, "We will not give you a platform." And after a while I realized, "Okay, well, then I'll create it myself." Though I love doing it for me, the bigger reward is to create platforms that I didn't have, opportunities that weren't given to me, so that other artists like me don't have the shitty moments that have happened to me. If I can create a safe space for them to be able to feel seen, even for a moment, then that's bigger to me.

I really believe that you are not your truest or best artist if you're not bringing people along with you. If you're just up there selfishly by yourself, then congratulations, but then, what else? I want to share in the moment, in the wins, with all other indie artists that have been a part of this journey with me, and we are still building and creating it for each other. There aren't a lot of safe spaces in the industry. So it's important to create them for people to notice that it's there, for mental health, for the sake of good art.

What creative skills from your music career were you able to bring to Papa Ted's?

At first, I didn't have the resources to build my staff, I was just starting out, and it was during COVID, so I taught myself how to do the snowball machine because I wanted to make gourmet, artisanal snowballs. The visual of our presentation, and our design of how we present our food, I almost treat it like an album cover. It makes our snowballs one of a kind.

It was fun learning and having people be like, "This might be the prettiest snowball I've ever seen in my entire life." And then tasting it and being like, "Oh my god, it is also really good."

I approached my music career like a small business, so it was almost like a homecoming starting this business. I just applied all the things that I did when I was an independent artist, how I marketed myself, how we chose to brand ourselves.

***Pigments* is your first solo album where you're crediting another person alongside you, Spencer Zahn. But you're no stranger to collaboration because of your background in Danity Kane and Dirty Money. Why does collaboration matter to you, and how do you know when somebody is a good collaborator?**

To me, collaboration is the hardest. You have to figure out that balance, that sweet spot where you're not fighting each other. You're cohabitating together.

I had started out, even before Danity Kane and Dirty Money, as a dancer in the NBA. Before that, I was going to the Olympics for softball. Partnerships and teams have always been very normal and natural to me. But it is also difficult because you have to find that fine line.

I did an album called *Infrared* with [the producer] Kingdom, and that project was another collaboration where the producer had his own sound, and I had to figure out a way to not lose Kingdom but also partner with him. I didn't lose me, and it didn't sound like just a Kingdom album featuring Dawn.

It's the same thing with *Pigments*. Spencer is his own entity. He already has his own space. It was about finding and understanding where the composition lies and where I lie, especially in something like this because it leans more into classical and ambient and new classical sounds. You have an orchestra involved. Musically, lyrically, the singer has to find their space in it. It was really important for me to understand my place within this project.

It was challenging. I love that for me because the other albums have been so immersed in myself. Second Line was a lot of me producing it, a lot of me all over the project. [Pigments] gave me a quietness and stillness that I had to humble myself in as a singer and say, "I don't need to be all over this record. What is the message? What is the intent? What is my place within this?" I wanted to be more a part of the orchestra and be used as an instrument rather than "me, featuring an orchestra."

It was finding that balance as a writer, as a storyteller, and also as a musician. It was quite challenging but pure and honest. With Spencer being who he is and us being able to have this really beautiful communication between us and the musicians, we were able to find that sweet spot. Teamwork and collaboration has always been one of the most fun, challenging, and rewarding experiences for me because there is an energy that happens on records and on stage when you're next to people who share in that passion.

It's beautiful alone on stage, but when you're on with an ensemble, you can feel the energy of the other person, and the moment it syncs and everyone is on that one accord, it's so much more powerful to share in that feeling. I've always felt that. That's why I loved being in groups. That's why I loved being a part of dance companies, and that's why I love doing this project with Spencer. And that's what *Pigments* is, everyone on the same wavelength, working in tandem in such a beautiful way.

What's the value in staying with the same collaborator for a long period versus switching collaborators?

It's easier to say, "Ooh, I found a sound with this one person. I'm going to do 90 albums with them." It's harder to sift out your sound, change to another producer, still keep your sound, and then go to another producer and fight for your sound.

It's been a bit of a project for me to see if I could sustain my authentic sound with multiple different people. I've built that for so long that now I enjoy that challenge, especially because some of the producers I work with have really strong sounds, and it's also knowing I can work with anyone and be able to come out of it with everyone feeling charged and renewed and people feeling like, "Damn, this is better than the last one."

I also love doing it because it pushes me to have to fight for my sound, who I want to be as an artist musically, but also see how I can fit in all of these spaces and have a throughline, have the message be the same, the storytelling be the same, but the planets, the spaces, the territory change. I always found it easier to just say, "I'm going to find one producer and create this one thing," but to have many...and people still say, "Ooh, that sounds like Dawn," that's hard to do.

That's the homework I've always done for myself, to see how much I could solidify the sound of me so that it can sit in any space and live and grow and touch others. And then, my collaborators do other projects and it doesn't sound like what we've done. For example, the producer Machinedrum can go over and do this and it sounds like he's over there, but the project we did is ours. It's still me. And then going and doing something with Spencer, and Spencer doing his project, what he did with me is something else. That's profound and beautiful to me. I hope I can always have that kind of flexibility.

Dawn Richard Recommends

Book: Children of Blood and Bone by Tomi Adeyemi. This book soothes my Sci Fi Soul. As a lover of Afrofuturism, this is a book pioneering a new wave of culture and community through literature.

Satya Sage Candles. My favorite sustainable candle. Black Women owned brand. Such an elegant and beautiful candle that I use For all my yoga sessions.

Domango Training Healing Crystals that are in my bag no matter where I go

My baby my dog Rocco. He's always with me. I adore him. I'm a pit bull mommy.

My easel. For days of reflection. I draw and paint. This is my sanctuary.

Name

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Vocation

musician, multimedia artist, animator

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Clifford Usher