

On allowing yourself to be proud of your accomplishments



Musician and podcast host Danny Brown discusses getting older, getting sober, mentorship, and being honest with yourself.

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As told to Meredith Graves, 3286 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Podcasts](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Beginnings](#).

How are things in Austin? How have you been keeping busy?

It's great. I love it here. I mean, I wish I would have left Detroit a lot sooner, to be honest. Hate to say it like that, but it's definitely a place where I can take care of myself a lot more. It's a more healthier lifestyle for me here. I've been working, making music again. But I'm just pretty much always home with my dog.

Okay, you set me up for the one question that I really wanted to ask you today right at the beginning..I heard you have chihuahuas. I want to know about them.

One's laying on me right now and getting pissed at me, I keep talking while she's trying to sleep. But no, I love her, man. If anything, it keeps me disciplined, having that connection with an animal. It's just different. I mean, she's a little special needs in some sense. She's got meningitis. It's something she was born with, a brain condition. It costs a shit ton of money to keep her alive, so I'm always worried about her. She's very needy; I can't really leave her alone too much. I had an all-day video shoot yesterday in New York, and I literally left there at 4:00 in the morning just so I can get here around 10:00 so I can take care of her ass. It keeps me out of trouble.

There are so many negative stereotypes of small dogs, and especially Chihuahuas, but once you have one, you figure out that they're really special.

Yeah. Ditto, she's a hairless chihuahua, so she's a quarter Frenchy too; that's probably why she has this brain condition. That's not something you're supposed to be fucking with, breeding and all that kind of shit. But she's making me rub her belly now, so she's all right.

There's a lot of musings on Detroit on your new record that seem pretty specific and pretty poignant. Has that been a result of moving somewhere new? What's changed for you?

No, the album was done before I moved here. But I mean, when I first moved down here, I lived downtown and was going out and partying a lot, which ended up with my ass being in rehab. Now I live up north in the suburbs. It's more family-oriented up here, so it's kind of quiet, and it's peaceful. I live right across the street from a church, so it's just really peaceful over here.

Congratulations on, what is it now, more than six months of sobriety?

Thank you. I mean, I don't need no credit for it. I guess I can be proud of it, but I shouldn't have had myself in that predicament in the first place.

That's a mature perspective. Watching the last few episodes of your podcast, it seems you talk about it really openly. Have you found that there's something important to you about discussing your sobriety with people?

In rehab, I really connected with one of the counselors there. We was talking and he was like, "You have a platform. A lot of people really look up to you, so you can help a lot of people. And that helping people is helping yourself in sobriety in some sense." So I really hear him always telling me that, because he would say that a lot. "You get out of here and make sure you help somebody else, man."

And I get messages all the time from people telling me how much it's starting to make them look at their situations, and wanting to take the steps to get help. I feel like maybe this is my calling in life in a sense, to be that person. I guess a lot of people see me go through it—and it's easier to take advice from somebody when you know they do it, than somebody just preaching to you, telling you certain shit. But people have seen me at my lowest.

I just want to help people. That's really where I'm at in life right now, with music or with me talking about sobriety, you know? Whatever I can do. People send me messages all the time because I tell them on the podcast, "You need somebody to talk to." I get so many messages from random people, and I answer them all. I talk to everybody. It's one thing to be sober for yourself, but now I feel like I'm being sober for all these people. So for me to fuck up, it's like I'm fucking up in front of the world and not just me or my family, which is bad enough. But now it's like, I don't want to let these people down. I don't want to let myself down, but it'll just keep me really walking that straight and narrow line. So I don't play. I don't do nothing that would even jeopardize it. I put that shit over anything.

You said something about that in a recent episode of your podcast that I thought was particularly meaningful, because it's something a lot of people worry about that's hard to put into words – how an artist might be afraid that if you get clean, you won't be able to make art anymore. Was that one of the major considerations that you had before you made that decision for yourself?

Yeah. But I realized it's just in me, to be honest. I made music for years before I even was getting fucked up like that. It took some time for me to be able to feel comfortable doing it sober, but now I'm having more fun than ever with it. I think I'm better than ever, to be honest. I think, if anything, me getting fucked up was just making it worse. It's a blessing that I was able to make what I was making being fucked up. It's almost like an injured player still out there having a good game. Now I feel like I'm healthy, and like I said, I feel like I'm better than ever now. Because before, when you fucked up and shit, you're just like, "Let me just get this shit over with so I can go do what I want to do." But now it's like I'm actually enjoying the process of just making shit and being creative.

Are you excited to get out and play more shows with this new perspective?

Yeah. I mean, I've been doing a tour with Peggy, the Scaring the Hoes Tour, and it's just like a newfound love for that. Before I would be onstage and I'd just be worried about the after party type shit, you know? It's gotten to the point where it's almost like a therapy for me to be onstage—that energy of seeing people have a good time, seeing them have fun and be happy and shit, it made me start to have fun and be happy. So it was like the bright spot of my day was to be able to go onstage, where before it'd be something I'd be dreading and getting fucked up just to do it. And now, without the drugs and the alcohol and everything, it's like my drug and alcohol is to be onstage and performing. So yeah, I'm excited about that, because it is fun. It's fun to do it.

Another thing you talk about on the new record is getting older. What's the biggest thing you're noticing at this point about what it means to gain seniority in rap, or what it means to be the age you're at now and still making music with all the experiences you've had?

I mean, to be honest with you, I don't even feel any older or anything like that. I feel like hip-hop always kept

me young in some sense. But I never really had a chance to grow up - I mean, I never really worked too many jobs or had adult problems or concerns. I literally do the same things I did when I was 16. I just play video games and rap and buy clothes.

As far as me and the seniority thing, I love to give younger artists advice and stuff for them not to make the same mistakes I made, and just teach them how to deal with it—which I'm still learning myself. Because the biggest deal with me is, I just can't handle fame. It's uncomfortable for me. I feel like I did a lot of self-sabotaging to keep myself as close to myself as I can. So maybe that has a lot to do with why I don't go out a lot, too. I love people to come up and talk and take pictures and stuff, but I'm also still uncomfortable about it.

I'd love to hear more about the process of writing this record. Had it been in the works for a long time?

Yeah. I wrote it during the pandemic, so I was pretty much just alone, and I had nothing. I wasn't working, I wasn't doing anything, so I would just be in the crib by myself... I mean, I felt like that was the only way to stop me from fucking going crazy as fuck, you know? That's when everything was ramping up; I didn't really care about myself at that moment. Even though the music don't reflect that, it was almost like me losing all hope type shit. But I don't know, it's my form of therapy, if anything. That was the way I was able to get out what I was feeling. Because as a man sometimes, hanging around my homies and shit all the time, they don't be emotional like that, talking to each other and shit. If anything, if I was sitting around crying about my problems to them, they'd be like, "Motherfucker, you know what I'm going through? Everybody got problems." So that was the only way I could really get it out.

Now that it's done and just about to be shipped out to people, how does all that make you feel? Like, "Phew, now I'm in a much better mood and I'm ready to put this out"? Or do you feel like this record getting out and into everyone's hands is going to cause you to reflect, or even revisit some of that sadness?

Before, when I was getting fucked up and everything, I would always put so much pressure on myself and be so stressed out. I couldn't sleep, and would be using and shit, and getting fucked up just to escape all that shit. But to be honest, I just haven't been thinking about it! At this point in my career, I just feel like it's a blessing that people are still interested in hearing what I'm doing. Every now and again, when I'm in bed and I can't sleep, then it'll come to me and I'll just get the fucking anxiety. But I've just been living like it don't exist, to be honest. And then I go to do some work for it, and that's when it remind me like, "Oh, you got an album."

I'm confident in it. I feel like I put my best foot forward. So maybe that has a lot to do with it too, where before, putting out a lot of those albums in the past, it was always such an experimental leap from the last one. I'd be like, "Man, I hope people like this shit." Where now it's like I've tested the product so much, I kind of know. You know what I'm saying? There's going to be people that don't like it, going to be people that like it. I'm able to accept that criticism way better now than before, I think. Just a more mature outlook on how subjective music is, you know?

What were you listening to while you were writing?

I mean, to be honest, I wasn't listening to anything. I was bitter. I wasn't listening to music. I didn't listen to music for some years. I just now started back getting into loving just listening to music and shit. I mean, I would hear shit—I'd be at the studio and shit, the homies, we would hang out, we would play shit and listen to shit. But in my personal time, if I was at home, I wouldn't be listening to music. And if I was, I would be listening to like... jazz. I'd just have my Amazon player and I'd be like, "Just play jazz," and I don't even know what it's playing. And it'd just be playing some shit. And I'd look every now and then, I'm like, "Oh, okay. It's Ornette Coleman." But I was listening to jazz at that time.

That's real. I think that's another one of those things that people don't really talk about—when you work in music or when you work with music, by the time you get home or by the time a project is done, you just want to put on a podcast about World War II that's seven hours long.

That's what it was, too—a lot of podcasts in my life. That's probably why I'm doing it now and shit. But I was listening to podcasts more than I was listening to music at that time.

Speaking of podcasts, it feels like a really unexpected but perfect fit for you to have a show. It's always been strange to me why more musicians don't try that, once you've been on the other side of the interview and you know how weird it can be having someone firing questions at you and putting you on the spot. How did your show come about?

Me and Tom [Segura] used to talk a lot. He always used to be like, "You should be on podcasts." And I was like, "Man, anybody can set a fucking camera up in a room and say they have a podcast." But when I went to do it with him, he had a full staff, a studio. They would be in there working hard. So I would be like, "Man, if I do it, I would do it with you more than anything." But they was in LA at the time, and I was in Detroit and I wasn't having any intentions of going to LA and doing anything.

And then I was dating a girl here in Austin. I was coming here a lot, going back and forth from here to Detroit because me and her was getting more serious. Then one day [Tom] was like, "We moving to Austin. We moving everything to Austin. We about to be out there now." And a light bulb went off like, "Fuck it, I'm moving to Austin too then." We started working on the podcast that day. It took years before we even shot the first episode. I was already here, I want to say, a year and a half before we even started filming for it, almost three years ago. And we've been doing it for a year now.

With that—even though you've said you're dealing with the imminent release of the album by not really thinking about it too much—while you've been doing interviews for it, is there anything people aren't really asking you about *Quaranta* that you wish they would pick up on?

For the most part... I think this album is the most musical, the production bit. It's not just weird-ass beats or traditionalist boom bap hip-hop shit. This is the most live instrumentation shit of an album I've done. I don't think no one really said anything like that.

Is that something you're going to want to do more of in the future?

Yeah, definitely. I mean, sampling shit is fun, but paying for it... you know? If you can get with people that can make this shit sound like samples, then it's just better on my pockets.

It also probably opens up your options. I'm just thinking about you being in Austin now, there's so many bands down there that I'm sure would love to.

I know. I need to meet more instrumentalists, motherfuckers that play instruments. But I feel like it'll happen when it needs to happen. But yeah, definitely I'm putting more live instruments into my production.

If you could talk back to your 30-year-old self putting out *XXX* from where you are today, what would you want to say? What would be the big thing you would tell your younger self from where you are now, in this moment?

To be happy and not stress about it. Because I think back then in general with my career, I never had the chance to embrace it and feel happy or feel proud of myself. So I guess in my sobriety, I'm realizing how blessed I am, to be honest.

I always felt like one bad album, one bad mistake and everything was going to be over with in a flash. Almost because I felt like I got on at such a late time—and so I was bitter. I wish I just would've been happy for myself instead of coming with this attitude like the game owe me something, because it didn't. And the fact that I got on at such a late age, I would've told myself I need to work five times harder than the young guys, instead of feeling like everything was owed to me because it took so long for it to happen, and people didn't respect how talented I was. Because don't nobody owe me shit. So yeah, I would tell myself to be proud, because I was never proud of myself or never felt like I made it—but in all actuality, I did.

I just have a whole new outlook on it. Like I said, during this album, I didn't even know if I would be alive to see it come out. I was pretty much in a suicidal stage. I didn't care about myself. I was killing myself to live in some sense. And seeing the fact that I made it out of that, I feel like I don't own it. This is a god-given talent, so who am I to say when I'm going to stop? It's when He wants me to stop, it'll stop, you know? As long as I'm blessed to be able to come up and do songs and write music, I'm going to do it.

Now, I want to make music to make people feel happy, because before, it was like a therapy and trauma dump, you know? And now I want to make music to make people feel happy or inspired. In some sense, I'm cleaning up the mess I made; where a younger kid probably heard songs I did before, and it probably made them experiment with drugs because they heard me rap about it and now they think it's cool, now it's just cleaning up my mess with that. Instead of people hearing my music and getting sad, I want them to hear my music now and be happy and dance—escape their problems, and not have to hear mine.

The Essential Danny Brown:

"Monopoly" video, from his classic 2011 album XXX

The 2016 collection Atrocity Exhibition

This episode of Pitchfork's Over/Under

His fashion, which inspired a recent retrospective "best outfits" post at Highsnobiety.

"Get Your Life Together" w/ Kim Congdon The Danny Brown Show Ep. 53

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