

On devoting yourself to what you do



Singer and poet Jamila Woods on developing her intuition, the healing potential of storytelling, and the revelatory experience of discovering the words for deep-seated emotion.

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As told to Lior Phillips, 2727 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Poetry](#), [Magic](#), [Mentorship](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#).

How's your morning?

I was cooking something, so in 30 minutes I just want to check on it!

Sure! What are you cooking?

Just a quiche. It's my easy go-to.

Nothing more comforting than a home-made quiche.

I do it in a really easy way too. I just have a pie crust already made, and then I put chicken sausage, tomatoes, pesto, and seasoned eggs. Easy.

Speaking of comforting, I noticed your album release date is Friday the 13th. Did you choose that day intentionally?

I was talking with an astrologer the whole time. She says that's also a very big astrological day. There's an eclipse happening around that time. I'm excited.

Have you always worked with astrologers in your creative life?

I've definitely ramped it up recently. For the past maybe five or so years, I have had a reading once a year. This friend of mine, she's also a musician, she's particularly passionate about helping artists know when to release stuff, so I worked with her for the first time and now I want to do it every time.

My whole promo period, she was like, "That's going to be during mercury in retrograde, so it might feel slow. It might feel hard to schedule stuff." That was really true, so I didn't worry about it. I didn't personalize it.

You seem to also be very connected to yourself, very aware. Is that important for a musician?

Yeah, I definitely think so. Trying to develop my intuition has helped me in my life, but also in my art. It comes to me more easily. Either I like something or I don't. I want to do something or I don't.

I've been trying to use things like tarot and getting in tune with the moon and my cycle to really tap into that even further.

Do you feel any differently about this record being so personal as it gets closer to being released? Did you have to keep conscious of protecting part of yourself in that trade-off?

That's such a good question. With my first solo album, I put it out and then I re-released it, so it was a lot of talking about it twice. Then at a certain point I felt this weird dissociation with the idea of myself created versus who I felt like I was. I would talk with my therapist a lot about that, and I think that influenced me to really dive into watching interviews with artists that I admire. How do they talk about themselves? How do they represent themselves in a way that feels full to them or feels authentic?

I'm proud of the vulnerability on this album, even the little moments of my personality. Hearing me and my friend laugh on a voice memo, it feels so true to me. Not that my other projects weren't true, but just showing a different side of me feels a bit more like connecting uppercase J Jamila to the one that I feel like on a day-to-day basis.

I turned the album in in March, and there was a moment in April where I was like, "Wait a second, this is going to be heard by so many people, and it's like opening my journal to everyone." That was my intention. But sometimes you follow an intention and somewhere along the way you realize what it means and it's intense. Now that it's been more time, I just feel happy and excited for it to be out and to think about what happens to me after it comes out and after I perform it. That always feels like the final step: not just putting it out, but embodying it on tour.

Did you need anything special in terms of creative resources to tackle the more personal subject matter?

I think it was having so much time in quarantine just sitting with myself. I did so much running around before, I don't even know how I did it. I had a full-time job being an artistic director of a nonprofit and I was teaching. And a lot of my inspiration comes from what I'm thinking about, so I'm always reading, talking about it with my students.

So instead, I'm sitting at home for years, journaling, learning tarot, looking up astrology, trying to make sense of everything, and also just sitting still enough to notice patterns in relationships. Me and my friends would send really long voice memos back and forth. I got more regularly into therapy. I just observed myself, so that became the material that felt most present.

As you were trying new things and adjusting, did you need to redefine success in that effort? How did you know you'd struck something worth building on creatively while also working on yourself?

I've done so many albums—two solo albums and two albums with a band before that—and then poetry too, and there's always a question of when it's done. One of my poetry teachers used to say, "No poem is ever finished, so just give up on that. That's not the rubric."

For me, there's lots of moments in the studio where I call it just "whelmed." I just start tearing up when I write something and I'm like, "Whoa, where did that come from? I made words for some feeling that I hadn't had words for." It affirms me the same way it did in college when I was learning words to describe structural racism or gender dynamics, and I would see something and be like, "Oh yeah, that's what's going on." That's really what guides me: when I feel like I'm finding language that's making a lexicon for a feeling.

That takes a lot of work—like a relationship. As an artist, how did you build into that depth while making sure that there was some lightness in the process for you as well?

Yeah, there was a long period of wandering where I was just writing a bunch of songs and I saw that there was a common theme of relationships and love. I'm so concept-driven normally, and it felt like a rug being pulled out

from under me to not know what I was building towards.

I think the "aha" moment was this conversation I had with [producer] Chris McClenney about the phases of a relationship I feel like I go through, whether it's the obsessive crush, feeling a bit ambivalent, getting the ick where I find out things I don't like, all those different phases. That became a guide. Of course, that's a cyclical thing, because relationships end and they begin again. So that helped, knowing that I wanted to capture everything from the beginning moments, the lighter, flirtier moments. They seem simple, but there's so much going on around what we're projecting onto those moments. Like, "Oh, I like them, so what's that going to mean for my future life?"

There were a lot of times when, if I was sad about my relationship and I had a session, that's the material. It wasn't that I had to be sad in order to write, but I got really focused through the quarantine on not having prejudice against certain feelings. It doesn't feel good to be angry or to be sad, but it's information.

When I look back at the songs that I didn't put on the album, I had this sense of wanting the vibration of the songs to feel higher or fair to everyone, because there's a lot of songs that are like, "Fuck you, I don't like you. I'm mad." I wanted the songs that make it onto the album to be a bit more complex than that.

That produces a more complex and well-rounded mirror of your life, which lets listeners get to know you so much more as an artist. You mentioned your experiences as a teacher, as an activist. Do you think those parts of your life are inseparable from your creative output?

Definitely. It's a symbiotic relationship. I think that's so clear in Heavn and Legacy! Legacy!. I'm the oldest of four siblings, and I would always make my siblings play school and I would be their teacher. I think I just really liked that as a mode of being. Not like I know everything, but I want to share things and talk about it and see how other people think about it.

When you're a teacher, you're not coming into the class like, "Oh, somebody broke up with me." You have a boundary. I think subconsciously not having that role so present in a literal way [during the pandemic] allowed me to access a vulnerable part of myself that felt more free to be a fuller part of myself.

Just a heads up, I think it's almost time to check your quiche!

Yes, yes! Thank you. Five minutes.

Besides baking, how do you balance the introspection with quiet moments to give yourself a little bit of a break from having to show yourself all the time?

Maybe it's because I live in Chicago, but I think I build my life to have a lot of balance to where there's a distance between me and the career, the publicness, which I really appreciate. Sometimes it does make me feel a little like an alien. When I was making this album, I worked a lot in LA. When I first got a publishing deal, my relationship with my A&R there has been amazing, and I was like, "Send me everywhere. I want to meet everybody." I met a lot of great people, and I also had a lot of experiences where I felt like a fish out of water. We operate differently in Chicago. I was really struck by that.

Another thing that I really rely on is my mentors. I have a poetry collective, for example, people who are my first listeners. I learned that early. Especially with Legacy!, I was showing them everything as I went, sometimes getting feedback that was throwing me off or discouraging me, even though they didn't intend it that way. Then I realized it's really important when I choose to share and who I choose to share with.

One of my great friends and mentors, Krista Franklin, she's a poet and a visual artist, and she's always like, "People ask what I'm working on. I'm working on this bottle of wine." There's so much room in what we think about as our work that's just living and being and resting. That's so important. Especially now, after the quarantine period and ongoing pandemic, I know that's so important for sustaining anything.

The record seems to flow on an intentional pace in that same way—especially opening with “Bugs,” moving from this airy feeling to something into a bigger world.

Yeah, that was so intentional. We thought of songs as having partners or little groups, and the opening three songs are supposed to feel brighter, lighter, that fluttery new feeling—“Wow, I could be in love.” Then transitioning into the conflict negotiation in the next group of three, four songs.

You’re building a world, so you have to welcome people in. “Still” also feels like it’s establishing a new language, these vintage elements, funk bass, lots of unexpected twists. It’s almost like post-punk.

Yes! That’s a song that I made with Wynne Bennett first, and it was a totally different production: more synths, more R&B feeling. Then we were like, “Okay, we know we want this song and ‘Boomerang’ to go together.” So McClenney was like, “Let’s make it the same tempo. Let’s make it faster.” And “I Miss All My Exes” fits along there too, which has a lot of guitar, so we wanted it to be guitar-based.

We were figuring out bridges between songs and also representing all the music that I like. I think in past albums I’ve been like, “Do all these songs sound cohesive, do they sound alike?” This time it was like, “We’ll find the pathway between, I just want to make all the sounds that I want to make.”

I also wanted to ask you about collaboration. You’ve worked with Saba and Peter Cottontale before, but there are some other incredible collaborators on this record. How did you make sure that you approached collaboration in a way that would really service you and not slow you down?

I think about collaboration really intentionally. On my last two records, I worked with executive producers, really amazing people, but with this one I wanted to do that for myself—maybe in partnership with people, but I wanted to be more a part of that process.

I also really wanted to work with more women and fem producers. I met Alissia Benveniste at a songwriting camp and we really connected. Wynne Bennett and I made a bunch of songs together, and there was something really nice about feeling that energy, not being the only one in the room, just feeling different feminine energy to work with. Then McClenney, we met on Zoom during the pandemic and became friends. He has such a supportive spirit and openness about him. We just really understand each other. He’s a Virgo, and my communication style is Virgo. We like to create order.

And then working with Peter, Nico [Segal], those are people I’ve worked with for years and we always bring the best out of each other. Feature-wise, I’m always thinking, “If this song is a conversation, who would I want to have this conversation with?”

Getting on the road again and putting the music in front of people has to be a fascinating part of that conversation too.

Definitely. It’s been so long, since early 2020, since I got to perform an album set. And this album feels like it wants to be performed more like an album than how I usually approach it. I think I’ll have to do something to zhuzh it up, maybe covers, but the album feels like its own thing and I want to kind of give it its own moment.

I would bet you get a lot of people saying your music has a healing quality. As a poet and songwriter, do you think there’s a certain expectation of tone or purpose to what you produce?

I think I do have a predisposition towards the healing quality of telling a story. For a long time I wanted to go into the medical field. My mom’s an alternative medicine healer and physician, and my dad’s a physician. I just remember always asking them, “What’d you do today?” They would tell a story of how they saved somebody, or with my mom, like, “Oh, we did a past life regression and we learned why this person’s claustrophobic,” or whatever. That always fascinated me.

Once I got to college, I realized I didn't want to study science. But that's still the way that I synthesize information, whether it's from my own journal, my own life experience, looking at people who inspire me, or reading poems. There's a process of alchemy that feels very healing for myself, and I think it reverberates out to the people who receive it.

I read something that said the practice of prayer is the practice of devoting yourself to something, so that will spill over to how you devote yourself to other people in your life. I think it's the same with making art. When I'm on tour, I'm drinking water. I'm so disciplined—but why can't I do that cleaning my own kitchen or something? My friend Jasmine says, "The way you do one thing is the way you do everything." With creativity, I hope it influences the way that I do everything.

Okay. The quiche looks perfect.

Jamila Woods Recommends:

Ragnar Kjartansson's multimedia art installation "The Visitors" blew my mind

"What I Didn't Know Before" by Ada Limon is one of my favorite love poems

This might be the most amazing smelling body butter I've ever used.

Urban Belly restaurant in Chicago. They have some of my favorite french fries

Drinking hot peppermint tea with toasted coconut milk and honey

Name

Jamila Woods

Vocation

singer, poet, teacher, activist

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