On the importance of breaking unhealthy patterns

Musician Tricky on not caring about staying on top, discovering the real reason for making music, lacking confidence off-stage, the importance of maintaining independence, and why he doesn't think writer's block exists.

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As told to Lior Phillips, 2381 words.

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When was the exact moment it clicked that you would become an artist?

People seen it before I did when I was about 13, running through town with my mates. There was this guy who knew a friend of mine, and he said, “See that kid, Barry? He’s going to be someone.” But when I was about 15, that’s when I knew. I knew because I didn’t try anything else. A lot of artists, they have a hard time. They’ve got to do all the hard work, the small shows, selling your record out of your van, all that stuff. I never did any of that. I was doing live stuff for fun, Island [Records] signed me, and I went to number three in the charts. I never had any of the hard work to get to where I was going. It was written for me. I was destined. The hard work came when I was successful.

Once you had that success, how did your process differ? What was that new difficulty?

I don’t care about staying at the top. I’m not trying to stay relevant, because my music doesn’t sound like anybody else’s. My music’s always going to be relevant. It was easy getting to the top, but then when I got there, all the success messed my head up. Messed my life up. I was just so not grounded.

A guy who I used to work with at Island Records said an interesting thing: “Tricky has a problem. He got successful really fast, but he didn’t have the management to show him how to live when he became famous.” You’ve got to keep your head together. I didn’t have anybody to show me how. My management didn’t manage any big artists. They never had a Coldplay, or whatever. That was the hard part. But I didn’t work hard getting there. It just all fell in my lap.

I remember when I was about 28, and I was in this really expensive studio in London all night, not really doing anything. I’m working, I’m smoking weed, chilling out. And I come out of there at five, six in the morning, and there was this guy, maybe 60 years old, working on the roads, a construction worker. That’s what I consider hard work. What I do is not hard work. I see young bands really working hard to try and get their success, to try and make money from their art, and I see how difficult it is for them. I never had any of that stuff.

The music industry, whether it’s a label or a magazine, tends to stereotype and pigeonhole artists. Do you consider breaking those stereotypes a part of your work?

That’s a fight. It’s a fight to remain independent. There was a time I was on Island Records, and it was

brilliant. But when Chris Blackwell sold the label, that's when it was difficult. Because then you're also dealing with people's egos. You will have someone in a record company who's never made a song in their life, and they try and talk to you, try and give you advice. And it's like, "Listen, you run the label, let me get on with the music." I've had managers in the past say, "Well if you did something like that, we could do better." And it's like, "Who wants to do better? What makes you think I want to do better than what I'm doing? What makes you think you can even talk music with me?" That's like me telling a UFC fighter how to train.

How early on did you recognize that you needed to break those patterns, that you weren't going to follow any sort of rules?

When I did *Maxinquaye*, that was a weird sounding album. I remember an A&R guy at Island, when he heard "Strugglin'," he came out of the room red-faced. He was uncomfortable. I could see what *Maxinquaye* was doing to people, and how different it was. But when it was out for about a year, I remember going to the cinema and seeing *Antz*, and the music was like *Maxinquaye*. And I'm like, "What's going on here? All right, I'm a commercial artist now." It was never my intent to be a commercial artist. I felt like my music was taken away from me with the success. Someone in the French press said a really good thing: they said I committed commercial suicide. So, I went out of my way with albums like *Nearly God*, *Pre-Millennium Tension*, and *Angels with Dirty Faces*. I made it difficult for people to be able to put me on the radio, to sell millions of records. I could have been a much bigger artist than I am now, and I just can't do it.

It's clearly not about the fame, but what was the driving factor as each album came?

<span class="highlight"Years ago, when things were very confusing for me, I met a young man in Texas. He had had an accident, and had been in a coma. When I met him, the guy said to me, "I was in a coma for 10 days, and my parents played your music to me." And I said to him, "I don't know what to say to you." And he goes, "You don't have to say anything. Thank you for your music." My drummer met a nurse in Philadelphia who worked in a children's burn unit, and they played my music for the kids. And then I met a woman who was pregnant, and she said to me, "You're in my life, and you're in my children's lives."

Then it all clicked. I know why I'm here. It ain't about the money or the success. You do an album so you go to the top of the charts? Is that why you're doing music? It doesn't make sense. So, when those few things happened, I realized, "I'm here for a reason, and the reason has got nothing to do with me at all."

I've got kids who weren't born when those albums were made that come see me when I'm on tour and say, "Can you sign this for me? It helped me through very difficult times in my life." I'm not motivated by houses and cars. I understand you make money for your children's future, but you don't need $40 million for that. Being on *Forbes* Richest? Why would anybody want to be on *Forbes* Richest? What does that mean? Finding out my music helps people has been a real benefit for me, because it's made things easier.

In addition to breaking patterns of production, you've rejected stereotypes of gender, which was unusual within the hip-hop world at the time. Why was that particular expression important for you?

I've been like that since I was a kid. I wore a dress out when I was 15. And I'm not talking to a hipster place. I'm talking to a bar full of bloody ghetto dudes. If I see something and I like it, I'll wear it. The fact that I could make up a visual in my head, get someone to take a photo, and I could put that on an album cover? That was freedom.

Now you've got Young Thug wearing dresses and stuff. When I did it, rappers were not having that. Even tattoos—I was sleeved down when tattoos weren't a big thing. It was ghetto guys, prison guys who had tattoos. I can remember being in New York and Jamaica, and black guys stopping me and saying, "Yo, where did you get this tattoo?" It was different back then. Now, I wish I never had any. Everybody's got a tattoo now.

How important was it for you to break barriers and stand out visually?

I grew up with all different kinds of races, so it's not as simple as Black and white for me. But there are a few

magazines in England where I was the first Black guy on the cover. Recently, someone posted a picture of me from 25 years ago, and the guy said, “Wow it’s funny, Tricky looked like this 25 years ago and all rappers look like that now.” Another person posted a Billie Eilish song and said, “Basically Tricky.” And I thought, “What the fuck does that mean?” So, I heard the song, and I thought it was quite funny, because she might not even know who I am. Some people are influenced by me through other people. The guy from The xx said that he’d been influenced by me, and Billie Eilish could have been influenced by them and not even know who I am. It’s quite weird.

You didn’t realize how far your work could reach.

No, I didn’t. I live in a little bubble. I spend 98% of my time by myself. I’m by myself, but I’m not lonely. I’ve been living by myself for the last 20 years. My family says I’m a loner. It’s natural for me. If I walk into a room with loads of famous people, I don’t feel comfortable. I’m not very confident. On stage, I’m confident. In the studio, I’m confident. But in real life, I’m a bit uncomfortable being recognized. Artists are some of the weakest people you’d ever meet. All this confidence—that’s bullshit. And if they believe it, they’re living a lie. Actors and musicians, if these people are so confident and so happy, why is there so much substance abuse?

How do you prepare to go into the studio and start working on new material?

Years ago, I was talking to Daddy G from Massive Attack about going into the studio, and he goes, “What have you got prepared? What are you planning to do?” And I said, “I have no idea.” I realized if you go in with an idea and it doesn’t work, you’re lost. But if I go in with no preconception, basically either I like what I make or I don’t. It’s that simple.

I don’t think we control music. I’m not trying to be all spiritual and all that, but something else is going on. When writers say they have writer’s block, I don’t think it exists, because you don’t own music. What I’m doing, I don’t own it. I’ve never had writer’s block in my life. I don’t think it exists, because I’m not in control of it. Sometimes I go into the studio and my plan is to record, but I’ll just listen to music and end up not doing anything.

Another thing: I don’t try to finish things. If something’s close, it’s done. All my music, every one of my albums, every track, I could go back and do something else to it. But I don’t think like that. To me it’s like, “All right, that song gives me a good vibe. That’s it. It’s finished.”

Speaking of not forcing mystical connections, you’ve got that with Marta, the vocalist on your album. I love the story of the way that you came to start working with her. It almost sounds like she just appeared out of thin air.

We lost our singer at the last second, and she stepped in on an hour’s notice. We were playing in London, and the crowd was shit. My promoter at the time put me in a hipster place. It was fucking terrible and I was hating it. I did the same song three times in a row because I hated the crowd. Anything they wanted, I was not doing. I was just destroying the gig. And Marta couldn’t deal with the crowd either, and that’s when I knew, “Yo, this is the one.”

The song “Hate This Pain” on your new album also embraces the idea of breaking down destructive patterns. But that song is one you sing yourself. How do you know when a song is one you need to contribute vocals to yourself?

That’s really simple: Sometimes I just can’t be bothered to get up and get on the mic. When I give the lyrics and a melody to a singer, I can sit there with the headphones on and say, “All right, do this part again.” When you’re doing vocals, you have to work. So, basically, if I’m excited to get up and do the vocal, that’s the one. My management asked me, “Why don’t you ever put more vocals on your album?” And I just can’t be bothered.

That piano loop on “Hate This Pain,” for instance, that’s perfect for my vocal. Sometimes I just know when it’s perfect for me. But I would love to do an album with my vocals, but with someone else producing it. I have more fun writing to other people’s music than mine.

With this album now out, how much have you already changed creatively since writing those tracks?

I’m always on to the next. This album [just came out] and I’ve got another two albums nearly finished. In combat sport, there’s a thing where you say, “Take a picture.” If you stand there and admire your work, that’s when you get hit. So, I don’t look at it. I don’t think my work is for me. It’s for other people.

I met Radiohead at this award ceremony in England years ago. 3D from Massive Attack was there, and he said, “Radiohead want to meet you.” So I went over and said hello to them. I think it was the guitarist, I can’t remember who, but he said, “We listen to ‘Aftermath’ on a loop for an hour before we record.” I didn’t know what to say to that. So I said, “Okay, thank you.” But, as far as I know, they’ve never mentioned me in the press. If I was inspired by a hobo on the street, I would tell you their name, where they play on the street, what subway they’re in.

Tricky Recommends:

Five favorite recommended people to check out:

Pernell Whitaker

Johnny Tapia

Malcolm X

Ricky Gervais

Tricky

Name
Tricky

Vocation
Vocalist, musician, producer, actor

Erik Weiss