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As told to Max Freedman, 2357 words.

Tags: Music, Writing, Journalism, Beginnings, Identity, Politics, Process, Multi-tasking.

On the creative spark of the everyday

Musician, writer, and journalist Michael Love Michael discusses always seeking out newness and growth and how identity and art shape one another. Before I knew your music, I knew you as a journalist. What skills from your journalism have you brought to your music and vice versa? How did one inspire you to start pursuing the other?

I like to think of myself as a writer of many disciplines. I don't feel like I'm just one kind of writer. Music, for me, is an extension of that. It's another way for me to tell stories that I'm passionate about and get a message out in a way that feels, in some ways, even more all-encompassing than journalism might allow, because with journalism, there's always the need to be objective.

With music, you can't really be objective, or, if you're objective, it may not make for the most convincing material or emotionally resonant work. Even with journalism, I was always covering things I was interested in, so there wasn't a lot of objectivity in it, even if the lens ends up being sort of objective.

How do you decide which stories to tell via journalism versus with music?

I don't really make that delineation mentally. I'm interested in so many things. Also, I haven't actively been a full-time journalist for a couple of years now, so I feel like I'm a bit removed from the world of journalism [compared to] the way I once was.

As a journalist, I always had this desire to champion the underdog, and musically, I still have that desire. I want to see stories like mine out there as a Black, queer, and trans person, so I'm elevating that musically.

How did you get into journalism? How did you get into music?

Music came first. I've been making music since I was about 16 years old. I had a family friend who taught me how to make my own beats on a software program called Fruity Loops. I had this shitty little laptop and I would run home from school and watch TRL and try to do my homework. Then, I would spend hours on my headphones with this little laptop and this little microphone, recording demos to beats I'd made. I was in the practice of writing songs from that age, but I didn't have a lot of infrastructural encouragement. I didn't have people all around me being like, "You need to pursue this." It was a thing I did almost in secret for a while.

I was always interested in writing before I became interested in the journalistic side of writing. When I was a kid, I was also writing poems and short stories, and I used to ask for composition books every year for Christmas, and CDs. I always wanted two things from the new releases section that were vastly different. One year, I got a Shaggy album and then something by Björk. I had that, and then I had these composition books from Walgreens, and I would fill up the composition books with all these stories and songs.

Journalism came much later. I wasn't on the school paper in high school. That was a college thing. I wanted to be an author, I wanted to be a musician, but people were like, "Those are trades that don't pay, and you won't make money, so you have to do something that's going to make money."

At some point, I took a reporting, writing, and editing class. It was an entry-level journalism course through the media school. The teacher I had was named Anne Kibbler. She said I had a natural knack for telling other people's stories and elevating stories. She also said I had a natural news sense and that I was already a really well-developed writer with a well-developed voice. She encouraged me and I got really obsessed with that feedback. She encouraged me to write for the college newspaper, and I became the arts editor.

Then, I basically abandoned my studies. I was still in school, but working on the newspaper became more important than going to class, because that's where I was really getting the real-world training and the chance to practice these skills I was developing that I already had a knack for.

How do you edit your writing and bring it to completion?

Every good writer has a good editor. I love working with editors, and I don't believe that I'm a writer whose work can be untouched. I like to rewrite things on my own.

I always remember, even as a young editor at the school paper, I really wanted to be a mentor. I wanted to be someone who could somehow pass along what I was learning. Even though, at the time, I didn't know as much as I know now, I had this desire to help shepherd the writing of others because someone had done it for me. Ann had done it for me. Then, I had the fortune of being edited by really talented people also at the school paper.

As far as songwriting, that's more of a process of rewriting rather than editing. The way I can start writing a song, and this is the way it occurs to me now, is, a lot of the time, I'll have a dream of myself actually performing the song somewhere. All the music is arranged, there's lights, there's looks, there's an audience. I imagine myself singing something on stage, and I already can hear the musical elements. From the guitars to the snares, to the kick drums, to the electronic elements, I can hear all of that really clearly. Then, usually, I can hear snippets of lyrics.

Often, I'll wake up in the middle of the night from a dream and jot down ideas, or I'll reach for my phone and groggily record something into my voice notes that's a bit of a melody, or words attached to the melody. I'll go back to sleep and wake up, and then I'll write on top of that.

I'm always ruminating and thinking about, "How can this be a song? This experience can be and should be transmitted into a song." It's that old adage of, you write what you know. I like to think everything I experience is creative fodder in some way. Everything I go through ends up being something that I can use. Whether I realize it or not, I'm writing by just living my life. Even if I'm not actively putting pen to paper, singing into my phone, doing a voice recording, or actively going to the studio, the way I live my life is an act of writing.

How do you know when something is done?

Intuitively, I think. Music and the visual world around that, and everything I do to build up the sonic messaging that I'm putting out there, that's all guided by some kind of force that's within me and beyond me. It's inside of me, it's outside of me. It's like a higher power, an inner power, so I know something is done intuitively if it feels good and like it has the kind of emotional impact I want it to have.

Your newest album, *To Build Me A House*, has something from just about every genre. It's also just you and your executive producer on these songs. How does that freedom and flexibility play into the roulette of genres in your music?

I think I have this fundamental "when others zig, you zag," that kind of thing. When I was working full-time as an editor and full-time as a journalist [on staff], if I had a beat, I would always somehow find a way to go outside that beat and get involved with something else. Or I would let someone else at the company know, "Hey, these are also my interests." I would get involved with that, too.

Then, before I knew it, I had irons in different fires. As a creative, I crave that kind of variety. I need that kind of variety. It's not necessarily that I get bored easily, but it's that I have this restless creative spirit that, once I really get started, it's very hard for me to stop or rein it in. I'm always looking for the next thing. That approach extends to my music. I'm really pleased to hear you touch on the genre-agnosticism of it all, because I feel like that's how I approach music-making. That's how I approach even the music I listen to.

I'm so interested in so many different things and so many different ideas. I'm never going to be a person that is one flavor of anything. Part of that is my cross to bear as an intersectional human being. Being Black, being queer, being trans, being a person who's been in recovery for a long time, being a person who has studied different kinds of spiritual modalities, I'm what you might call a seeker. I'm always going to be searching for something else. If I identify with it and it colors my world sonically or in terms of the written word, then yes, so be it.

You've been unafraid to say that your work explores themes of trans identity, spirituality, and sexuality. How do politics and creativity intersect for you? How do they not intersect for you?

I've said this before, and it's not a new idea, but I do believe that what's personal to you is also inherently political. [One] can't really exist without the other. My Blackness inevitably influences the way I make music. My queerness inevitably influences the way I make music. My transness inevitably

influences the way I make music. My life is my canvas.

To further elaborate on that [earlier] idea of "to write is to live, and to live is to write," I'm always going to have material to draw from because, as long as I'm living my life authentically, seeking out newness and growth, seeking out a variety of experiences, asking myself questions that will help me evolve, experiencing different kinds of relationships, and going to new places, I'm always going to have stuff to write about. I think the second I stop doing that is the second my creativity dies on the vine. That restless creative spirit I have won't let that happen.

There's a moment in your song "American Flag Bikini" where there's the sound of a shooting at a protest—presumably, the gunfire is coming from the cops—and then, right after that, you sardonically, almost flirtatiously sing, "I shouldn't be so sexy." How does that sudden shift between the grandly political and the very personal embody what you just talked about?

That has to do with the fact that, literally, people like me are under attack. To me, it's a sonic juxtaposition of the idea that I'm under attack with the idea that I'm going to claim the space I need to anyway. I'm not saying "I shouldn't be so sexy" as in I have no business [doing so]. It's cheeky. It's not literal, but it's saying that I understand there are consequences for being myself in this climate, the way things are.

As a queer person myself, I totally get it. I asked because that moment just completely shocked me the first time I heard it. That transition, I was like, wow. The first few times I heard the song, I was like, "Is it even okay that I'm laughing at this?" So I appreciate you saying it's cheeky.

Yes. What I'm really describing is this inherent duality and nuance I have, just as a person. That comes out musically also. It's cheeky, and it's dead serious at the same time. It's both. I'm completely serious about communicating the idea that, as a Black trans woman, I know that I'm under attack in this country, and I'm also deadly serious about claiming my space. I'm also totally taking the piss out of bigots and transphobes, homophobes, you name it, when I say "I shouldn't be so sexy, I shouldn't wear no flag bikini." In the video, I'm wearing an American flag bikini and showing my ass to the camera. So it's all of the above.

Michael Love Michael Recommends:

The Phantom Tollbooth by Norton Juster - This book saved me as a child who was full of creative fuel but suffered from untreated depression. I see myself in the preteen protagonist, Milo, who was like a walking Zolof commercial, always with a cloud above their head. Milo escaped into a world of fantasy, held up by nonsensical rules, as a way to confront the depth of their sadness. To realize their own life could be as playful and hopeful as their imagination would allow. For me, art provides a similar, and often life-saving escape.

Aaliyah - self-titled final album - From the very beginning, Aaliyah pushed the boundaries of her art, sonically and visually, and wasn't afraid of her shadow self or her sense of weirdness. It was never more alive and obvious to the world than on her final offering in this realm, which is eerily prescient if you really think about it. There's a reason why we all still talk about her and her impact on music and art. Again, as a young Black child coming to terms with my own womanhood, seeing Aaliyah embrace every side of the diamond she was showed me that I could do the same.

My new album To Build Me a House on cassette. Support independent music! Support Black trans women and our efforts to make the world better simply by existing, let alone creating!

My red string bracelet - it's on my left wrist, and represents a commitment to completing cycles, to processing out of negativity, and embracing my inner light.

Thank God For Abortion t-shirts - a great (and chic!) way to help carry the message of bodily autonomy. And if you can't do that, donate to an abortion fund - Indigenous Women Rising is a great one.

Name

Michael Love Michael

Vocation

musician, writer, journalist

Fact

Thomas Polcaster

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