

On prioritizing joy



Poet and musician Alabaster dePlume discusses working with play, bringing people together, and doing things because you enjoy them.

December 2, 2022 -

As told to Tasha Young, 3285 words.

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

We are at the Total Refreshment Center. I read Emma Warren's book about this place, Make Some Space, before coming here. I would love for you to tell us why this place is important to you, how it helped you get to where you are today, and why spaces like this are important.

I wouldn't be making the work that I'm making now if it wasn't for this community. They requested—they demanded of me that I do this show every month, Peach. Doing that show every month demanded that I bring the different musicians and connect these different communities here. The way that we are in this space not only welcomes but requires the combining of different communities. I've grown since then and taken this way of being out to other places. I'm delivering it further afield.

Peach was an album, and I put on an album launch—I was just going to do it once. Then Lex [Blondin] was like, "You need to do this every month." And I'm like, "No, I'm not a fucking promoter." I thought, "I can't do this." And I was right, I couldn't do that every month. But then I thought, "Oh, but maybe we could do it. *We*."

How do we bring together different communities? People wonder about this. People work on this. So, if you see that your project is only really engaging with one type of person, the only thing that I've come across that we might do about that is giving people jobs, giving ownership of the work to members of different communities. How do I know that I'm not contributing to the division between us? I only know that I'm not working on the division between us when I know that I'm doing something about bringing us together, bringing different people, people who disagree even, preferably. How do I bring different people together? By employing them.

And so I used this thing, "I've got to put a show on every month. Oh no, it is hard for me. There is not enough money." Is it a lack, or is it an abundance? I used it as an excuse to bring different people from different parts of music stuff in London together. Then I was like, "Oh, I am glad that I chose this situation because it means that the best thing we'll make will be something that no one could have planned!" And that happened because we responded to each other. We ended up connecting my work with lots of people from different communities, and they all came to know each other and be glad of each other and work with each other through this role, and through enjoying playing and interpreting my work. And I ended up making lots of fresh material because people aren't going to watch the same thing twice. It was a lot of fun.

Why is it important to me and how it got me to where I am now? I'm less seeing it as "where I am now" as a place, and less seeing this community as some sort of vehicle, some sort of car that has driven me to a place where I now am, and more like there's a way of being that I have that was required here. And I allowed it. I allowed myself to be that way in response to this community. It's like it already was there. Like when you make a sculpture and the sculpture already was there, you got rid of some stuff, there's less of it, but it's more itself. Yes? I think I got that from *Rambo*. So you can quote *Rambo* in your piece.

How do you go about touring this way, internationally, playing with different musicians in every city without getting to rehearse?

When people ask me, "How do I do this show?" I'll say to them, "I don't know. If I knew how to do it, then it wouldn't matter who was there." How we do it depends on who. Maybe someone is suffering a loss in their life. Maybe someone is really big right now. How do we do the show? And I love to respond to them. I will tend to have one player who's got their hands on the material really well so that between me and that player, we've got access to a lot of tunes.

Is it true you play games to get in sync?

Yeah, the games. We're going to go, "Hi-ya," *[with a karate-chop hand movement]*, but we're going to do it when I do it. You ready?

Yeah.

Hi-ya! Come on.

Hi-ya!

Hi-ya. Hi-ya!

Hi-ya!

Now you lead.

Hiiiiiiiiiii..yaaaaaaa.

You're very good at this.

Thanks. I think that encouragement to be playful is important for anyone trying to do any kind of creative practice. We all have to get past that controlling mindset of, "I have to be good."

If I demonstrate by loving my players, by encouraging my players—I'll stay on the mic, "If in doubt, yes. I love that you are here. Play like a child plays with a toy," and it gives them authentic encouragement—then that demonstrates to the audience that this is a place of encouragement. Whereas to say to the audience, "Now, this is a place of encouragement, okay?" This doesn't really work. But if we encourage one another, then that just demonstrates that this is.

That's perhaps the role of a place like this, the TRC, where we come together and support one another and challenge each other in our work and are striving for the success of our work and yet we're attuned with one another. That's the role that it plays in our society, that leadership is leading on that front. Those who experience it or are affected by it, maybe people who've never set foot in this place are touched by that influence that we are working on here. If there were not places like this, there would be less of that in this life that we are making.

When I say to them, "Play with my show the way that a child plays with a toy," for one thing, it demonstrates that I am bold, and that this is unusual, and it says to me that I trust you, and that I can take care of this. "I will be responsible for this situation, and you are liberated."

There is a child in you. And you might not have been talking to them, and you might not have been treating them right. They might have had a hard time. And I welcome them if they want to be there. If they don't want to be there, that's their choice. That's fine. But, they are there, and I've got one too. And we can find our way to

other feelings that are there that are less celebratory. Some things that are darker can come because the child was allowed. Whatever you do, they have come anyway. How shall we make them welcome?

But I don't need to make it, "Now look, this is going to be therapy. There are some things that you may have suffered when you were young. And I want you to..." I'm not going to do that, but I can say, "Play like a child plays with a toy. Ha, ha, ha, ha."

Give it a try next time you work with someone. I didn't just bring someone, I brought you. Show me what that means. How could I know what that means? Show me what that means, and we will have everything we need. I am here to respond to you. I didn't come here and just want, "Oh, get somebody to do this in a particular way." No, I want you. Just think of all the faff that went into you being you. So much had to happen for you to be yourself. How am I going to find anything that compares to the enormous effort that has delivered your personality to this moment? I need it to be you. You brought yourself, which is an immense thing, a divine thing.

I understand this philosophy also informed the process of your album, Gold – Go Forward In The Courage of Your Love. Can you explain how you carried this approach into your recording process?

For some people, it's more important that we can capture the thing than it happens. For me, it's more important that it happens than we capture it. There are some things that people prioritize that I don't prioritize as much. And there are some things that I prioritize that other people often seem to just throw away. The things that I prioritize are more basically fun, childish creativity, and response to each other. I put lots of work into setting it up so that our priority could be the joy in the moments that we had.

And there's rules in there.

Like what?

"We're not going to listen to this music." I didn't have to say it, I just kept everyone too busy. Typically, in a recording studio, you play the song, and then you go into the other room, and everyone listens to themselves, and checks, "Was I good enough?" We don't do that shit in my session. My session is not about, "Am I good enough?" My song is not about, "Am I good enough?" But I didn't tell the players this. I just kept us too busy playing and enjoying each other.

There's another rule that I didn't say, but I just had: We don't talk about whether or not the tape is running. My songs are not about a tape machine. It could be running. I don't care. That's not my job in this room. I've employed somebody in the other room to take care of that. I trust him. Kristian, capital K. He will decide what needs recording or not. That's none of my business and that's none of the business of my musicians. We are all right in here. We've got each other to enjoy, thank you very much.

I had planned in advance that every time we play those pieces of material, even though we're playing them in a completely different way each time with different bands, developing them according to their own feelings—even though we did that, we still, at the same time, played them each time at the same speed. That means I can play back all those bands at the same time, I can put them on top of each other and mix them into each other. I had done a lot of preparation for it to be chaotic, for it to be human. I put work into allowing it to belong to the people who were there.

What does your curiosity look like? How do you explore things?

I think the way from fear to excitement is curiosity. Things changed for me when I started going towards the fear. The first thing I came up against was, "I'm not afraid of anything," but I thought I must be afraid of some things—maybe the things I'm afraid of are invisible to me because I'm so automatically drawn away from them. If I find myself responding to something really automatically, really reflexively, like, "Oh, obviously I'm not going to do that." Now I go, "Oh, is that what I'm afraid of? Okay, I've got to do that thing because I'm afraid of it." Can I be curious about any aspect of this thing that I'm afraid of?

I do depend on the humanity of others because if I can be curious about them, then I can advocate by that action of going towards them for empathy. And I can welcome them and demand of myself that I am vulnerable and incomplete, that there's a space in this work for them because I want there to be space for that person. And I want there to be space for you, whoever you are, who's reading.

I don't know what I'm doing and I am incomplete, and I can be sound, solid and cool with myself while being incomplete. I can forgive myself for not being enough and present myself that way. And there's room for you, whoever you are. I'm very happy that you're there and I'm very happy that you're anywhere. I admire you that you're there because it is tricky being alive. And they are doing it, aren't they? Whoever they are. And they're passing their eyes over your page and breathing and striving to exist and it's noble. And it helps the rest of us. The more you are yourself, whoever you are, you make me more myself, too. And the longer you succeed in this striving, you inspire me to do the same thing.

How did you learn to have this perspective on the world and on people?

I don't know if I've finished learning it.

You go about your daily life with an encouraging, spirited way of engaging with others. Have you encountered people who don't believe you to be sincere? There's so much cynicism in our culture, sadly, many people aren't used to hearing these things, or maybe they just don't know how to receive them.

If I'm not all right with myself, then whoever's experiencing that thing, they're not stupid. They can tell. And it doesn't reach, they receive it in a bitter way. Sometimes, to reach someone, I need to go even bigger, give them even more love, for them to receive it. And if not, I just leave them, give them respect, and accept that if they've taken me in a negative way. I look at myself: Well, what's going on? And what have they seen? Everyone's up for connecting with someone's genuine love. It's just a question of, did I deliver that? Was it genuine? Or it was genuine, but I failed to deliver it to them? And the way to love someone is everybody's got their own way to be loved, to be reached.

I think people who haven't spent time with you may not understand at first that Alabaster dePlume isn't exactly a character or performative persona. I don't sense there is a gap between Gus and Alabaster.

Yeah, they're both me. They're both real, but it's only particular parts. And so, when you get on the stage, it's not like I've invented a person, and I'm pretending to be them. It's just certain bits that are more responsible in the situation.

From that, I'm interested in your sense of responsibility for joy. Why is joy so important in your work?

I don't know what we're doing, and when I say we, I mean the human race, but if we're not prioritizing joy, then we might be prioritizing something unfortunate. In our society, we see it as silly, as frivolous, as decorative to prioritize joy. But if we are not prioritizing that, we're prioritizing something else. What is that? It's not my place to ask someone else that question before I've asked myself. And if I want us to consider prioritizing joy, and you see harm happening every day... I could go to the IDF and say, "You should be prioritizing joy." Would I be prioritizing joy then? I can lead by example.

The way I see my work, I'm not just decorating this world. And I used to think it was sad that people would see it that way. That this work is frivolous. But I don't think it's sad anymore, I think it's actually dangerous. I think it's an attack.

It's not for me to say what other artists are, and what their responsibility is. But as far as I'm concerned with my stuff, people pay attention to what I'm doing, and I've got a responsibility towards them to be true. For my own sake just as a human, I'm going to prioritize joy, because I feel like it, I enjoy the idea of it. It's not the only thing I'll prioritize, but I have a responsibility to be true with those who come with respect. To treat them equally with respect. Some are coming to me authentically to listen, and it would be rude not to respect

them with a true thing.

What is something that you wish someone had told you when you were starting out making art?

I think I am starting out. And if somebody had told me not to do something, I would've done it. And if they had told me to do something, then I would've not done it. But I remember realizing that no one was ever going to ask me for the best thing that I've got. I was an accompanist, and I was like, "I've got my amazing things I could do, but I'll wait until someone asks. Someone should ask me for that." And I remember realizing that they never would. They never will. I realized that it's not because they don't want me to, it's because they don't know what it is.

We will never ask you, whoever you are, I don't know who you are, but I will never ask you for your awesome shit. But it's not because I don't need it. I do need it. I will never ask you for it because I don't know what it is. Do it now before we are ready. Do it even if we're telling you not to. Do it because we're telling you not to. How could we know what it is? You've got to do it first. There are 7 billion people in the world. Don't tell me that your shit is so special that none of them need it. Get over yourself, get out of the way, the song wants to come through. The great thing wants to happen. Let us allow it to happen.

How do you get out of your own way? Or how does one get out of the way of the song, or the writing, or whatever?

We can get out of that by going through it. It becomes so crushing, this idea of myself, "Oh, I better do something good." Eventually, it's so crushing that you give up, you give up on yourself as an artist, and then after that, you can get on with your fucking work.

I play in the show and everyone stands and listens to me. I am invited to think that this situation is about me being good at something or not, but it's not. No one gives a shit if you're good at it. We've not come for that. We've come for something more important. It is very impressive when someone is skillful at producing blah, but I don't care about it. I'm selfish. I want their soul. So, what do you need in order for me to enjoy your soul? Well, you just need a soul. Have you got a soul? Yes. You've got a soul. Give up trying. *Allow*.

But it's easy for me to just say these things. Could I produce a poem from this perspective right now? I don't know. It's a moment that chooses you. It's a moment that you can enjoy. Enjoy the song because you enjoy songs. Enjoy the writing because you enjoy writing... I mean, is that such a strange thing?

Alabaster dePlume Recommends:

Thich Naht Hanh

Jiu-jitsu

Vladimir Vysotsky

Gestalt therapy

The Russian Sauna in Canning Town (London)

Name

Alabaster dePlume

Vocation

musician and poet

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