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As told to Max Freedman, 2586 words.

Tags: Music, Collaboration, Independence, Money.

On cultivating community through your creative work

Rapper and entrepreneur LaRussell discusses building infrastructure to uplift those around you, how helping others fuels your own creativity, and letting your ideas flow.

It's a great idea to have everyone interested in funding your music contribute just \$1 to your work. Where did that idea come from, and relatedly, what value do your community and listeners have in how you create art?

Kickstarter reached out because they seen the work I was doing and they wanted to lend a hand and help. I was hesitant at first because I serve the people a lot, and I don't like asking for a lot in return, because I do it out of my heart. I was trying to find a way that aligned and worked and was an easy ask for me. If I'm going to ask for something, I'll just ask for a dollar since there's a million people following me and, hopefully, that can align and people will get together.

It was a spur-of-the-moment thought. I sat down and drafted some different ideas that I could do, and this was the one I landed on, "Let me hold a dolla." It's some shit we say in the community. You hear people at the liquor store, "let me hold a dolla." It was dope to use something that's a cultural monolith to us and take it to the world.

My ears, eyes, and heart are always open to the world around me. Growing up, I've always been a sponge. I'm always trying to figure out a way to integrate culture sustainably and show up as a Black man and an independent artist in a way that isn't vulture-ish or inauthentic, and my community allows me to do that.

The campaign really is not just about you. It's also about funding initiatives that support other artists. How does supporting other artists fuel your own creative process?

Helping other artists helps me cultivate my creativity because when I find an artist I love and believe in, I have to find ways to help them that may not be the same fashion that worked for me. I have to find new ways that work for them, and I did that through my Good Compenny platform and live sessions. I've done it through visualizers. I help artists with their business. It's an extension of my creativity.

How has not going major-label and instead staying independent allowed you to build infrastructure for everyone around you to be creative, and for you to be creative by helping them be creative?

It's very hard to loan resources you don't own, and I've been able to loan resources because I own it and I built it. I don't have to get someone's approval or ask someone to use their stuff for me to help someone else. I split royalties and revenue with my team and with the people who helped me, and I can only do that because I own everything I've created. I'm able to do deals in a way that isn't traditionally done. I'm able to do business in a way you can't do traditionally because I own the assets. I own the home, meaning I could allow whoever I want to stay there. I could let them rent it however they need. I could do whatever renovations I want to make it fitting to what I need to accomplish.

My independence has allowed me to create infrastructure that's just non-existent within the major label system. Seldom do you find artists in the major system who has their own infrastructure because they're so reliant on the person who feeds them.

On your Instagram, you've talked about lending yourself. Do you mean this as lending yourself to other folks' creativity, lending yourself to work in the gig economy, or both?

All of the above. I've lent myself and my cultural equity to platforms and startups that now have millions of dollars in valuation. I've lent myself to platforms and publications that do interviews that are new or just starting, where they get to use the cultural equity of LaRussell to pitch a story and sell it. I've lent myself to brands who want cultural equity, and beyond that to artists. It's like me lending my time. That lend can come in the form of my time, camera, or team, or even monetarily. I invest in a lot of people, so lending myself is all-encompassing. It depends on what way I need to lend myself for it to work with whoever I'm partnering with.

You have 1.1 million Instagram followers. How did you build this online community?

I just showed up every day. I built a [metaphorical] Walmart in the middle of a community, and after five years everyone starts to go shop at Walmart because it's there, and they see it every day and that's just their home store. That's exactly what I've done. I showed up every day and I was of service. I post content that people can learn from. I post content that people could smile about. I post content that people could heal from because they're going through a certain life, and I've become their source for inspiration. I've become their local store. It's really nothing beyond that. The numbers are the numbers. You can't do nothing but show up, and the people who love what you offer are the people who are going to keep coming back.

Growing your online presence, making yourself an important pillar in the community—can you make music without that?

For me, I can't because it's connected. I don't have a character. Me making my music is the same guy that people see in the community, the same guy feeding the people at Momo's, the same guy walking down the street picking his daughter up from school. It's not separate for me. They kind of intertwine.

Me making music is me cultivating community and the presence and building that. But in general for artists, I don't think you have to. It depends on the kind of career you wish to build. You could just make music and never cultivate community and still be successful. But you will not be a Tupac or a LaRussell or a J. Cole. There's just certain things you have to give to get certain things.

I've read that you've put out 19 albums since 2018. If that's correct, how have you kept that pace going?

I've put out 31 since 2018. The pace is really set by life. I don't make the music. The music makes itself. It just comes to me and flows out of me, and one day, the well won't have any water left in it, so I'm just using the water that's in the well while it's there.

I don't know how it keeps coming to me. I keep living life, and different things keep happening, and I'm growing as a human and experiencing different emotions. I have no choice but to let it out and speak about it. It just keeps flowing, so until the well's empty, that's just what it's going to be.

I talk to musicians decently often, and when I ask about their songwriting process, they say, "I don't really write songs. I'm more like a song catcher. An idea will exist and come to me, and I just help bring it to life, but I don't come up with the idea." Is that what you're saying?

Yeah. I'm a messenger. I call them downloads. I'll make songs and listen to them months later, and sometimes, I'm like, "Oh shit, I said all that?" Because I don't really write them. They write themselves. They come to you through the universe, and I'm really just a jukebox. You play a beat. You put a coin in, and something comes out, and we either love it or we don't, but I don't have too much control over that. There's a message that gets sent through and I'm the one who has to deliver it.

This makes me wonder to what extent editing is a part of your creative process.

I don't edit songs at all, honestly. Most of my songs are done in one take. Once I leave the booth, I'm generally done with it unless there's a song that we're like, "Nah, this is really good. We need this." But for the most part, if you go through my catalog, it's just one take. I walk in and the verse usually comes to me within 10 minutes. I walk in and I lay it down, and we're pretty much done with it.

You live in Vallejo. I'm curious how its proximity to artistic hubs as huge as San Francisco, Oakland, and Berkeley has taught you creative lessons. I ask this as somebody who isn't as familiar with Vallejo as those other cities.

Vallejo is actually—it's funny because it's the smallest, and it's the city you don't often look at, but Vallejo is the epicenter of creativity in the Bay Area. If you look at most of our Bay Area greats...you think of E-40, Mac Dre, H.E.R. SOB was one of the biggest groups that ever [came] out. Even in terms of the slang, the way we speak and talk, a lot of that originated from Vallejo artists. We're the epicenter of a lot of the culture that exists within the Bay. I'm influenced by every region, but I'm directly in the source of where a lot occurs.

Is that part of why the Backyard Residency is among what you're supporting with the campaign?

Of course. I've been doing the Backyard Residency for two years, but it was definitely something special to add because every year we do it and it sells out, and people fly in from all over the world. We've had

people from China, France, and every-fucking-where in the world come to these shows. As part of this campaign, it was only right to add it because the demand is so high and there's no finite way to get to a Backyard show.

I was looking through your social media, and I saw your advice to "just make great art." To you, what is great art?

Art that makes you feel good, or art that makes you feel, is great art. Art that impacts you, that changes your perspective, that alters your life a bit is great art.

Do you have the thought "this is great" when you're in the booth letting things flow out of you, or is that a concern for later?

I try to reserve those feelings. I don't often like to make that determination, but every now and then, I write something so incredible that I can't do nothing but feel that energy and bask in it. I get excited when I make a game-winning bucket and it's some shit that's apparent. But for the most part, I stay away from that. I just make the art.

I remember I was in a studio one time with a producer and they were making a beat, and I wasn't really enjoying it, and I almost told him, "Nah, we should probably make something else." But I just sat back and let him do his thing without spewing my opinion, and it ended up being one of my favorite songs. I think it's very important to not judge the art and to just let it flow.

To what extent is collaboration part of how you create your music?

Every part. I write the verses. Someone else makes the beats and plays the pianos, and someone else mixes and masters. There was a point of my career where I did every part. I [would] produce it, write it, mix it, master it, distribute it and everything. But now the entire process is collaborative. Beyond me writing my own words that come from my heart, all of it is collaborative and I love it. It's like when I do a live show. I have live instruments and every instrument has a human behind it. There's mistakes and nuances that exist that can only happen because there's another human with another beating heart there.

At what point in your creative arc did you go from somebody who had a day job to being able to do everything you do now as your whole life, and how?

Man, it's so funny. I pulled up to my mom's house the other day, and I just sat in the car for a bit and took a deep breath and was just like, "Damn, I don't have a job and I haven't had a job in a long time. But I work every day."

I was able to leave my job in 2019, and fortunately, I haven't been back since. The universe kind of just pulled me. You never know when it's time. Life kind of just tells you when it's time. Once it got to a point where it was in the way of what I truly wanted, it was time for me to get up out of there.

I think there's tiers of people. There's people who are supposed to work at [the metaphorical] Walmart. There's people who's supposed to run Walmart, and then there's people who build Walmart. Whenever you find out which type of person you are, you have to go into that lane and start cultivating.

It's interesting that 2019 was when you left your job, because then 2020 happened, which was obviously not a good year for anything.

I remember we ended 2019 on such a high. I had a big group meeting. It was in December, and I was like, "Man, we're going to take this year on and we're going to do this, this, this." And then Covid hit.

[The lockdown era] was a special moment in my life. I got bigger than I've ever been. I created a live performance platform, and throughout [lockdown], we put those masks on and just got to work. I ended up blowing up a lot of artists and helping a lot of locals through that time because a lot of people couldn't perform or create content, but I was still making a lot of content and going viral, and [I] started live-streaming my rehearsals. I just found a way to navigate it. It was a blessing in disguise for me.

It sounds like a lot of the infrastructure you built then is what's still there today and what you're helping to fund with the campaign.

Exactly. That was the makings of everything I have today.

That's a nice note to end the conversation on, but if you have anything else you want to say about creativity, about community, let me give you the floor.

He who is willing is who will. Nothing can stop someone who wants. Only you can get in your way. And I think it's very important for us to support and rally behind the people that we believe are doing great things, even if it's only a dollar.

I still owe you that dollar, so thank you for the reminder.

No, you don't owe it to me. You owe you that dollar. That's your tithe. That's the justice that you supposed to do in this world. You owe it to yourself to invest in something that's special.

LaRussell Recommends:

Tennis

Pickleball

Biking

Frisbee

The Creative Act: A Way of Being by Rick Rubin

Name

LaRussell

Vocation

rapper, entrepreneur

Fact

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