

August 10, 2018 -

As told to Max Mertens, 1576 words.

Tags: Film, Production, First attempts, Collaboration.



On the back-and-forth necessary for a healthy collaboration

Rapper, activist, and filmmaker Boots Riley discusses directing his first movie, what he learned from being an independent musician, and why healthy collaborations require some disagreement.

Sorry To Bother You is your first film. Have you been reading the reviews?

Yeah, I read a lot of the reviews. If you were to say something to someone, you'd be interested in what they had to say back. You're not just going to say it and walk away. It *is* a little weird because even the people who love it, sometimes they're breaking down what they get from it, and saying "Well he does A, B, and C." And I'm like "Oh wow, that's what I do." I could imagine that it could get weird for some artists to do that, because it could then change your perception. I've been reading reviews of my work for many years now, so I'm used to getting over that part.

When you were making music, did you read your reviews? I know a lot of artists don't.

Who doesn't? I don't know. Who are the ones that don't? I think that's a myth or a lie.

You wrote the script in 2011, but it took a few years for *Sorry To Bother You* to get made. What did you learn from your years in the music industry, business-wise, that helped you navigate these Hollywood waters?

I've been doing independent music for a long time. For instance, I've met some folks that have done music for 20 years but got on a major label right away, and they think they have an understanding of how the music industry works, but they don't at all. Whereas for me, we were selling our own tapes out of the trunk of our car, getting record stores to stock it, traveling around the country, and going to the DJs ourselves. All of those things that I learned about being tenacious, dealing with people, and rallying people have really helped with making a movie.

Had I not had my history of music, I would have listened to people that said, "Oh, just request the actors you want with the agent and then you wait for them, because you don't want to step on their toes." At first we worked with the agents. You try to get the actors you want from an agent, and they don't have it in their interests to get you those actors, so they'll string you along for a couple months while you're sitting there waiting. What they want to do is have you wait and then give you an actor that they haven't gotten a job for lately, that they owe a favor to, and it may not be someone that you want. Instead, I went around to people, I did everything, I used Twitter, I snuck into things and met people, all sorts of stuff like that.

I read that you were heavily involved in the making of *The Coup* music videos. How did that prepare you for filmmaking and working with others?

I don't think the music videos really helped out. It got me around the equipment and to be okay with a thing that looked similar to a film set, but the thinking in music videos is much different than with a film. "This is a cool image, that's a cool image, let's figure out how to put them together," you know? What really helped me make a film was actually producing music for 20 years. Overall I'd say the music video part that helped me was the editing aspect of it. I would camp out in the editing room even when I wasn't directing the video. Being part of that process, choosing images and all that kind of stuff, really helped me learn.

On the music production side of it, I'm working with live musicians and I'll be working with people who are masters of their craft. It could be the best bass player in the world, the drummer who thinks they're the best drummer in the world, the crazy guitar player. They each might know way more about music or their instruments than I do, but it's me who has to have the vision, and communicate that vision in a way that makes them eager to help and buy into it. I have to know how to communicate with them to figure out what it is that they each have to bring that's special to the project, and how to get them to implement that. I also have to know that the guitar player wants a guitar solo, and that might make the song worse. Understanding that you might have collaborators who have their different biases, and that I can't be swayed by that necessarily.

Can you give an example of a conflict that arose making *Sorry To Bother You* with all these different collaborators, and how you resolved it?

Let me see. Let's say this—there are things that wouldn't even necessarily be "conflicts." Our amazing production designer Jason Kisvarday—I'd have all these giant ideas so I'd be like, "I want to do this," and draw a picture or a sketch, and he'd be like, "But we have the money to do *this*" and he'd show me a different sketch or picture. That was just a constant negotiation back-and-forth of how we would get enough resources to do something in the amount of time we needed to do it. He obviously had a lot of experience in it, and he also had—just like any great artist should have—his pet aspects of it. Like, "I want to make sure we do this set in that way," because that's the one he was really excited about. But I might be more excited about this other thing. This sort of thing is always going to happen in any collaboration, in any band, in any family.

With Doug Emmett, the DP [director of photography], he had this great style and often we were negotiating on the lighting. There were certain things that I wanted to do that kind of challenged some of the things he wanted to do, but at the same time, he's the kind of DP who is going to try to deliver for his director. In some cases, we were pushing the lighting more than he was comfortable with, and in some cases I was right, but in some cases afterwards I realized he was right. Or even during it. It's the same kind of negotiation you have with your friend when you decide what movie to go to, you know what I'm saying? Or anything like that. It's not a conflict, just a constant back-and-forth. It's like, "Okay, this is what you want, but how about if we did this? Wow, that's actually way better."

Definitely in certain cases, things were way better than I imagined. We got thrown out of the place that we were going to have for the Power Caller suite. I had in mind what that Power Caller suite would look like, and people would have been talking about it, but we got kicked out of there by WeWork, they bought the place. Even though they weren't moving in for six months they didn't want us shooting. We needed another place, and we needed to find it within 30 days—and while we're shooting the movie—so we found this place and there were two things that made me decide on it.

The series of fluorescent lights going down the hallway that we see when we first hear Mr. ___ [Blank] speak, and the reflection and lighting behind where Cassius is sitting when he's getting a video presentation by Mr. ___ [Blank]. After seeing those two things I was like, "Okay, we can make this work." I had this vision of it that was maybe more pedestrian, and it was with Mr. ___ [Blank] in the center, and us looking up below and seeing the fluorescent lighting. And Doug with his experience, he didn't say these words, but he was kind of like, "Okay I see why you think that's great, let me show you how to make it greater" and moved it over to the side and made a classic image.

There were all sorts of those things happening all the time. With the production design, the telemarketing floor, that was just in a straight warehouse and that set was all built. Just the suggestion of that blue color was not one that I had, that was pushing it in the exact way that we were talking about pushing it, making it feel a little bit unreal but not so unreal that it's like *Brazil* or something.

Activism has always been a huge part of your life and work. What advice would you give young activists today?

That's a lot. You need to organize where people are—I mean geographically, physically, location-wise. People need to get jobs at places where they want to organize, as opposed to getting jobs with a foundation or a non-profit and trying to organize people to come to them after work.

Boots Riley recommends:

Emir Kusturica, *Underground*

Van Hunt, *Van Hunt*

Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*

Michael Ondaatje, "The Cinnamon Peeler"

Sergei Parajanov, *The Color of Pomegranates*

Richard Pryor, *Pryor Convictions*

Name

Boots Riley


Vocation

Rapper, Activist, Director


Fact



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