

On being intentional in your work



Rapper and writer Rollie Pemberton (Cadence Weapon) discusses being kind to yourself, finding new ways to build a world around your art, enacting meaningful change, and how downtime can lead to your best ideas.

February 17, 2023 -

As told to Max Mertens, 3007 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Writing](#), [Inspiration](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Collaboration](#), [Politics](#), [Process](#).

At the beginning of the pandemic, you took a break from making music. How did that allow you to recalibrate your creative process?

At the beginning of last year I was busy with projects that weren't conventional for me. For all of February, I was acting in a play in Montreal that Sean Nicolas Savage wrote, and then I was at the Banff Centre twice. I did this one project for Fort Edmonton and I did another project where I was the guest mentor for the singer-songwriter program at the Banff Centre. So I did all that stuff back-to-back and then the pandemic happened, and I went back to Toronto and it was kind of like "Whoa, what am I going to do now?" In my mind I was like "I'm just not going to do anything." I can't think of any time where I've had a moment to pause like that, and I decided to live in the moment and just absorb it all.

I think from that absence of activity, creativity just started forming organically. That was something I didn't really expect to happen, but suddenly I'd be going for runs, and I would find lyrics coming to mind or ideas that I wanted to write more about. I'd have to stop while I was running and type it all up.

Just through seeing everything that was happening culturally last year, whether it was the George Floyd protests, seeing the instability of all of our institutions...I found that very inspiring. I feel like a lot of the writing that I did on the album stems from a moment of sitting and listening, rather than being super active, and "I gotta make this kind of song, I gotta do this, I gotta do this." It was in the absence of activity that the ideas came.

You started a [newsletter](#) last year and you've recently been [DJing on Twitch](#). Have these alternative platforms allowed you to reach new audiences?

Yeah. I think it's important as an artist to reassess how you're connecting with your audience periodically. During the pandemic for instance, I started a Bandcamp, I didn't even have a Bandcamp before that. That was a really obvious thing that I could do that I hadn't done yet. I started a Twitch, I started DJing on there, and that was just from seeing people like [Skratch Bastid](#) or [Javemkayem](#) do their thing. Thinking of ways of breaking through the algorithm, that's what it's all about for me right now. I have a certain amount of following on Facebook, Instagram, where they make you pay to access your audience, right? I wanted to get into ways where I could avoid that kind of squashing my access, that's why I really like Twitch and I really like Substack so much.

One of the most important things with that is I can engage with my audience in a deeper, longer-lasting way than "Oh yeah, you just saw my Instagram story or whatever." I write a newsletter about a song I wrote and give all the references to what inspired me, and build an entire world around the song. It's this slow process that you don't

see a lot on the internet any more that really brings me back to the blog era or the early internet era. As an artist now, you have to find different ways of building the world around your art. Rather than going on Twitter and just posting a YouTube of a song I'm really into right now, I'll do a Twitch stream where I play all the cool songs that I found this week, and then I actually get to talk to and engage with my audience directly. I haven't had that kind of bufferless engagement with my audience in a really long time.

With the newsletter especially, you're giving people a peak behind the curtain and there's a certain vulnerability to it. When you were beginning your career, were there places online where you were reading about people making music?

I feel like the internet era when I came up, you could go on a message board and battle people and have rap battles. That's essentially how I learned to rap. I would be text battling or I would record on my computer mic and send it, and I'd be battling some guy from Denmark or whatever. It was a bufferless experience, there's no monetization of this at all. I had a Blogspot called Razor Blade Runner that really took off, to a point where I would go to SXSW for my first record, and people would know me more from the blog than they would from my music. I was writing for Pitchfork around then, too.

I never had as much direct access to my audience as I did back then. I feel like so many of the tech-oriented companies they want to bring your audience to them, but then they want to hide the audience that you gain while using the app. Spotify, there's thousands and thousands of people who listen to my music every month, who are they? I don't know, I can't access them, I can't send them a message, I can't talk to them about anything else. They know when I have a song out. I feel like that's a big difference with today and back in the day.

Writing reviews for your own blog and Pitchfork, how did that make you think about how your own music is received critically?

The ironic thing about it is I would be writing very incisive about rappers, but when I would get reviewed, I would be crestfallen if it was a negative review. I could dish it out, but I couldn't take it. I read my reviews because I do think there's so much value in music journalism. It's important to see your music from different perspectives. I'm not necessarily going to make my music differently based on what some other random person says, but I will take the criticism to heart, and really think about what did they see in what I was doing that I didn't translate clearly enough.

Can you give me an example of that?

On my second album, *Afterparty Babies*, some of the reviews said that my perspective was unclear. The album was really kind of satirizing the hipster era, but I would also talk about ways that I engage in it and appreciate it. For me, I thought that was very clear, it wasn't like I was being like "Go American Apparel!" the album or something. I feel like as an artist I could've made that clearer in how I presented it on the album. As long as a review is fair and it's not personal, I'm all for it, there's a lot you can learn from receiving constructive criticism.

For Parallel World, you worked with multiple producers, what are the challenges of putting together a cohesive album when you're dealing with so many moving parts?

The way I record is I'll always ambiently be making songs. Pre-pandemic I would be in the studio all the time recording, and usually an album will start to form around some of those songs. I think it would've been last summer when I started getting that feeling of "Okay the themes are really in my mind and I think I have the right beats for the themes." When it comes to looking for producers specifically, I'm looking for sounds that are pushing up against the boundaries of genres, that's something I'm always looking for. I really am very attracted to innovation when it comes to music. Usually when I meet a producer and we're going to do a session, especially when they're a more conventional rap producer, I'll tell them "What's the kind of beat that people always pass on, that's the one I want." I want the weirdest thing that you were excited about, but the artist wouldn't take, that's the one I want.

The only one that was made in-person was "SENNA," because we recorded it before the pandemic. That was something I started getting used to on my last album, and that's becoming the nature of how music is made, especially rap music nowadays. I didn't find that as challenging or coming together with a cohesive album out of all these different producers, because that's the really fun, easy part for me. It's like making a playlist or making a mix for a friend or something, I love it. The thing that's challenging is the administrative side. I manage myself. Getting the contracts together, getting the lawyers involved, doing the logistics for shooting the videos and stuff, applying for grants, all that other stuff.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think this is your shortest album, was that a deliberate choice?

Absolutely. With this album, I wanted to make something that was of its time and spoke to the times that we're living in today. It was important to me for the songs to have a lot of urgency and I felt like "Okay let me just get in and get out," but I want to make every line mean something. I want to make every song feel very dense, but not necessarily long. It's not one of those things where it's like "Oh I just want people to play them over and over and get a bunch of streams." I want to make songs that have staying power in a way where you can come outside of the song and take that into your life, and make the song be a jumping off point for a conversation or something. I wanted them to be almost like these sonic essays that people can take with them.

One of my favorite things about these songs is you're taking events and communities overlooked in Canadian history, like Nova Scotia's Africville, and connecting them to what's happening today. Tell me about the research you did for this album, and was there anything different about the way you approached it compared to in the past.

A lot of the songs on this album stem directly from things I read or things I learned, especially over the pandemic, I had a lot of time to read. I'm from Edmonton, I wasn't familiar with Africville until a few years ago. A lot of this stems from writing the article for Hazlitt about [Toronto neighborhood] Little Jamaica. I feel like writing and reading more during the pandemic, I've gotten better about making connections between things from the past and the present, and making connections about inequality and how things that have happened in the past can affect things in the present and the future.

I would be going through these books, and I would make notes on my phone of things "Oh that's an interesting theme or that's an interesting idea." For instance, [Samuel A. Floyd's] The Power of Black Music, they talk a lot about African cultural memory in that book and that was a concept I wasn't really familiar with before. It's this idea African-Americans who are ancestors of slaves, whether they have a direct connection to Africa that they are aware of, the pain lives on whether they know better about it or not.

On top of that, the idea of some of the sonic traditions we have today around hip-hop, whether it's performing in public for an audience or rapping in the middle of a circle or the circle as an emblem, these are things that go back to Africa. The more I learned about that, I was like okay, there's a continuum for a lot of these ideas and these traditions that I'm doing as an oral storyteller.

Your partner is an investigative journalist. I'm curious if that's influenced your storytelling in any way? Do you bounce ideas off each other?

I couldn't have met this album if I hadn't met Sara. She's a labour reporter, just through osmosis of hearing some of the stories that she's come across, and some of the things that she's written. Also her moral compass, she's the kindest person I've ever met, she always does the right thing. Being around someone like that really reminded me the core of what I wanted to do with music. There's a lot in rap where it's all about who can say the flyest thing, who can say the best slang, who can flip an idea the best, but on this album, I wanted to push further and go deeper where I was doing something that was meaningful, and useful for potentially changing the way people think or creating meaningful change.

You're currently working on a book, how does that writing process compare to writing music or poetry?

It's quite different. I had no idea how much harder it would be to write a book than it would be to make an album. The biggest difference is when you make music, it's done and you put it out into the world, and then you

no longer really have any ownership of it. People are going to do with it what they're going to do with it. Whereas there feels like there's kind of permanence to writing this book, where I'm going over it and self-editing a lot before I've even sent it to my editor, really manicuring it. I feel like in some ways because a lot of this book is autobiographical, it's coming easier to me, the weirdest thing is recalling things from like 2005.

What's the best advice that you've gotten for writing a book?

The best advice I've gotten is to be kind to myself. There are certain things that I write about that are painful experiences in my career where things didn't go the way I wanted to; it's hard to remember all this stuff, going back over tours that were just total failures and really bad memories. A good friend of mine told me to make sure you have your favorite snacks on hand, order that delivery, get your favorite drink, be nice to yourself while you're working on it because it's already hard enough.

You've been a vocal supporter of Toronto's Encampment Support Network and advocated for different causes throughout the past year. What has this work taught you about the importance of creative communities coming together to achieve tangible change?

I'm really impressed with what Simone [Schmidt] has done and everyone with ESN. These are people who are musicians and artists, who've lost their livelihood, and have come to the aid of people who are even more vulnerable. Really what I'm doing is signal boosting them and I really believe in what they're doing, and I really believe in the power of collective action.

That's another thing that I learned from Sara is the power of organizing. It's what the powers that be don't want us to do is get together and work towards a collective action. Because throughout history, whether it's the civil rights movement or anything else, it has proven to work. Unhoused people, they're a symptom of a society that has failed, and I feel like they're a forgotten people. I never thought more about their plight than I have during the pandemic. You see so many people losing their businesses, who are the people that can afford to buy a house in Hamilton and skip the pandemic. I'm seeing all these inequalities more clearly than ever, it's never been more important to support things like ESN.

Really during the pandemic, I started thinking of my Twitter account as less being just for funny jokes, and more for "Okay what kind of positive change can I do with this?" That would have been after the George Floyd protests, and you started seeing people fundraising for different things, and I put out my remix album and I gave a lot of the proceeds to the Canadian Association for Black Journalists. I was amazed, hundreds of dollars. It was like "Wow people really signal boost things like this." So I started thinking of more and more things I could do like that, and it's kind of become second nature where that's what I use it for really. I was really amazed I got to help them to change the name of the Edmonton football team just by making a tweet a lot of people got behind and different publications picked it up. That's something I really believe strongly in and they're changing the name. That was something that has amazed me over the pandemic is the power of collective action, and I feel like Twitter is the ultimate organizing tool, and I look forward to using it in more ways.

Are there any other mediums that you'd like to explore?

Let me just say I'm thinking about different ways of enacting change, and the thing I've been thinking about the most is can I potentially create more change from within the system rather than outside of it? I've been kicking the tires on some ideas about political stuff. When it comes to politics, it's always the same kind of person who does it, it's never somebody like you or I, an artist or somebody who takes the bus or actually experiences the issues of an everyday person, right? That's what really inspires me, even to just make a statement. I'm a black Canadian and I really believe I can make some change so why not try?

Cadence Weapon Recommends:

Desmond Cole - *The Skin We're In*

Claudia Rankine - *Just Us*

Ghetts - *Conflict of Interest*

William Deresiewicz - *The Death of the Artist*

Jenny Odell - *How to Do Nothing*

Name

Rollie Pemberton

Vocation

Rapper, Writer

□

Daniel Schechner