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As told to Eric Steuer, 1996 words.

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# On growing with your audience

**Rapper, producer, and musician Jason "Nosaj" Furlow (of New Kingdom) discusses the power of intent, why expression means more than genre, and what you can learn from inserting yourself into other people's creative work.**

**You've been making music for a few decades now. How has your process changed over the years?**

Well, for me, it's become more about intent. Back in the day, it was more about trying wild things out and taking a wait-and-see approach. But as I've grown older, I've realized the value of intention and conviction in music. When I listen to music now, I always ask, "What's the purpose behind this?" Conviction is crucial for me—if I believe in what you're saying, you've got me hooked. So, I've shifted towards focusing on conveying my conviction through my music.

Then, of course, technology has obviously totally transformed my process. And while I'm a bit skeptical of technology taking over, I'm curious, so I explore all the new tools. I'm that guy who's like, "Come on, pick up an instrument—even if you don't know how to play it!" So, I end up working with anything I can get my hands on.

**Can you share something important that you've picked up along the way? Something that you've taught yourself that's become a cornerstone of your practice?**

Back around '98-'99, after my son was born and I took a step back from my band, New Kingdom, I needed to keep my creative spark alive. So, I started recording verses over existing songs. I'd listen to, like, Modest Mouse's "Bukowski" and think, "Why not add a rap verse here?" It was a way to keep my creativity flowing without a commercial purpose.

Then I expanded on that idea and started inserting myself into existing songs. For instance, in Stevie Nicks' "Landslide," I'd reimagine the lyrics to make it my own: "You were climbing down a mountain, and you were turned around, I was hollering at the moon, you said you heard my sound." These exercises challenged me to think differently and add my own twist to established narratives.

Out of this, I ended up with a massive box filled with papers and napkins, containing all these archived ideas and fragments. I knew that when the time came for me to return to music, I'd have this treasure trove to draw from. So, years later, when someone contacts me about doing something, I have this collection of archived vibes that might just fit the puzzle. Like, if I need a verse, I can hunt around and pull something out that matches the vibe.

This approach has greatly shaped my work. DJing also played a part. Mixing records taught me how strangers connect with music. My stuff is pretty avant-garde, but when I DJ, it's a different game. It taught me about tempo, tone, and connecting with people in the moment.

**Back when New Kingdom emerged, there was a distinct separation between genres. Mixing rock and hip-hop wasn't common; it was almost a novelty. But now, especially with the internet, it's a different story—genres have blurred. How do you feel about this evolution and the way music has embraced diversity?**

It's the wild west, just like when hip-hop first started. Hip-hop was punk rock when it began—no rules, just your version of whatever you wanted to create. It ended up morphing into something bigger, more commercial, and we became accidental professional musicians as a result.

The industry tried to categorize us, find the best way to sell our music, which kept artists in narrower lanes, but now listeners are more open-minded, and so artists are too. It's because parents raised open-minded kids, and it's because that's simply how the world operates now. Before, you waited for a Nike Air

Force One release, now you create your own shoe online. Everyone has their canvas to paint.

This return to inclusivity springs from the internet and its lack of rules. These young artists aren't confined to genres; they're a product of all their influences. This new wave has embraced diverse sounds and is fearless about crossing boundaries. The emerging artists are doing something incredible. One day, someone's rapping, the next they're screaming—it's exciting. I appreciate that it's not about genre anymore; it's about expression. It's amazing to witness. I love how Billie Eilish's music is like, "Let's just put some weird dance music under this and see if these soccer moms like it." And they do. I dig the idea that there are no rules. It's just about doing you.

#### **How do you approach starting a new project?**

It depends on the project. Since I returned to music, I've been doing a lot of features on other people's songs. When you're doing features, you usually don't meet people in person. I've done over 20 features in the past couple years, and I've only met a couple of the folks I've worked with in person. They send me the track, sometimes we discuss the concept, but sometimes they say, "Just bring your vibe." When I'm doing that work, I listen to what they send me and try to find the common denominator. I try to simplify the song's essence. I approach it like a puzzle.

For my own songs, I get an instrumental together, loop it, and let it play as I sleep, wash dishes, walk the dog. I'm not actively thinking of lyrics; the music becomes a backdrop to my life. I listen to the instrumental while doing different things, waiting for a vision or idea to emerge.

There's no one-size-fits-all method. Every song, every project has a different approach. When I start a new album, it's like starting from scratch. I wonder, "How do I even write songs?" I feel lost. My friend told me once, "Live your life, and then the inspiration will come." So that's what I do—I go live life, let things marinate, and then slowly, ideas start bubbling up. It's like starting over each time, and it's so exciting. It's like, "I have no clue what this is going to sound like, but I know it's going to be insane." I love that feeling.

#### **Once you get going on a new project, how do you make sure you don't get too in your head about it? It's so easy to over-edit and second guess yourself.**

Totally. It's funny because the excitement of starting a new project can quickly fade when you actually start the work. I get so excited, thinking, "We're going to do this!" Then I listen to the demos, and my initial thought might be, "Wow, this is crazy!" But soon enough, I'm thinking, "This is terrible."

Starting a new project can be daunting. I shift from thinking I'm the greatest to feeling like I've made a huge mistake. I worry that everyone thinks I'm a fraud. Ultimately, what keeps me going is that I want the people who've been with me from the start to be proud and excited every time they hear my name. They should be proud of me continuing to mess them up, even as they get older. I want them to be like, "Yeah, you did it. You messed me up again. You continue to mess me up! I'm 50 now, and you're still messing me up."

That's what I'm striving for—that's all I want. That's why I admire a guy like Kendrick Lamar so much. I mean, damn, he's doing exactly that. There aren't that many hip-hop artists who evolve in this way. As an adult, you can still create and explore. Just like with rock and jazz records, hip-hop artists should feel empowered to take the listener on journeys through their own progression and life experiences.

The key is leaning in to having mature adult themes, or even exploring pop culture in unique ways. A Tribe Called Quest's last album is a classic example of this approach.

#### **Absolutely, that album really stands out in that regard. Over the past few years, I've actually been listening to it even more than their earlier albums.**

Exactly, me too. Want to know why?

#### **Why?**

Because when you're 50, you can't be trying to say the same shit you said when you were 20. Q-Tip is a genius who understands his audience. He shifted his style because his audience is still here, albeit with families and other responsibilities. He's not trying to speak to a new audience of young kids. Your audience will still listen to your music if it's good.

#### **It's interesting that you mentioned that last Tribe album, because it's the one I thought of specifically when you started talking about the ability for artists to mature gracefully. Very few artists of any age can compete with that album. Q-Tip is truly special.**

Absolutely. Very few people can pull that off. He nailed it with that album, and it's one of the best things that have come out in a long time.

These are the things I keep in mind when I'm writing and recording, too. Define the intent, and make sure it's clear. Make sure what I'm doing represents what I know to be true and isn't trying to speak to some hypothetical audience that I'm not even a part of. It's all about the choices you make. Not just in production and lyrics, but in approach. Artists like Del the Funky Homosapien, Black Thought, The Gorillaz, and others have also taken mature routes and it's worked. And you know who did this same thing

back in the day? Whodini. On their album *Escape*.

**You've mentioned so many of my favorite artists in this conversation. Ecstasy from Whodini was my first favorite rapper when I was a kid.**

Man, Whodini wrote *songs*, and there's a big distinction between people who write songs and those who write raps. If you write a song, it's different. It's about making choices—musical choices that even someone outside the genre would recognize. They might not grasp the specifics, but they understand the choices you've made.

I think it's a special time right now, and that a lot of these young artists are creating paths for themselves where they'll be able to keep evolving in that same way. The young artists do their thing, and maybe one day they'll mature into something like me—a Henry Rollins of hip-hop, transcending youth into something cool without preaching or talking down to people [laughs].

The reason I think my music succeeds on the terms I have set out for myself is because I don't talk down or try to be something that I couldn't and shouldn't be. I just make dope songs, keep it fly, and talk from the perspective of who I am now—someone who has seen a lot more of life than I had when I was a young person making my debut. It's all about staying fly, regardless of age.

**You've always made music that's been defined as being avant-garde and progressive. To what extent do you believe this label, whether you embrace it or not, has limited your reach to a broader audience?**

Yeah, well, I guess that's the problem with avant-garde and progressive hip-hop—it's not always considered "hot." It's never the new black; it's always standing on the fringe, talking about the stars.

But my friend told me something valuable about my last album. He said, "You have so many bangers on it." And I thought, exactly, these are bangers—but they're bangers in our universe. These are bangers, but that doesn't mean they're going to be for everyone.

Sometimes I wonder if the things we're calling avant-garde now will become popular one day. When you started seeing Grateful Dead stuff on hip-hop t-shirts, I was like, "You do realize this stuff wasn't always embraced by this audience, right?" So, who knows, maybe you'll see my logo on pop artists' t-shirts in a couple decades.

Jason "Nosaj" Furlow Recommends:

Enjoy the silence in the chaos

Take long walks

Say good morning to strangers

Locate the tone and you'll be golden

Have children

Name

Jason "Nosaj" Furlow

Vocation

rapper, producer, musician

Fact

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