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As told to Max Mertens, 2403 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Production, Mental health, Collaboration, Identity.

On being yourself

Singer and producer Channel Tres on taking your time, creating from a healthy place, the best kind of collaborations, and why sometimes the journey is more exciting than the goal itself.

Has your workflow changed in any way due to quarantine?

Before I was living in an apartment because I was on tour, and during COVID I bought a house, and so I've been building a house studio. The first thing I set up was my keyboards and speakers. I'm taking it as I go, as long as I can make stuff in my headphones.

First off, I was a producer before I became Channel Tres the artist, so I'm experienced at making different genres of music. I went to music school and before I was a session piano player, I was a songwriter, I played drums, I did a lot of different things. Also when quarantine hit, I couldn't really make records like "Top Down" and "Controller" and different songs that probably got people to know me. I can't really make that right now. I mean, I've definitely made some of those songs in my privacy, but this project I couldn't really do what I would normally do for a record—it forced me to change up my creative process.

First it was quarantine, and then when George Floyd happened, a lot of things starting popping up again. I had people vandalize my vehicle, and I couldn't sleep because outside there were horns and people protesting. I was going through a really, really scary time in my life, everybody doesn't know me as Channel Tres and I'm still a human, I have to walk around. I still have people scared of me or they clench up their purses if I walk into the store. It wasn't really a fun time for me to be making music, and the music that I was making while going through all of that and not having tour as an outlet, I was making what I felt.

I made a bunch of different songs. There were times where I would get like an Arthur Russell sample, chop it up, and then turn all the lights off, turn my headphones on, and get on the mic and say whatever comes in my head just because I was going through so much pain.

Taking this different direction from what fans might be used to from you, did you encounter any writer's block?

It was a curve, for sure, because I wrote about 75 songs. At first I was going to put the demos out as is, but I didn't really like the way I sounded, I sounded too depressed. Once I got through the process and I listened to them back, I was like, "No, just because things are going bad and you feel like this, doesn't mean you can put out something that's not quality." My conviction was telling me you know you can do better. I kind of took a break from music for like a week, I was just doing really domestic stuff, taking care of the house, walking my dog, cutting the grass, watering the plants, just really regular stuff. Then I got back to the music, I was like "Okay these songs are really good." They don't deviate too far from me as Channel Tres, but they're still different, and they still convey a message that I want and they're still quality. I stripped everything down, if that makes sense.

What do you do with the leftover songs? Will you revisit those ideas later or will you throw that material away?

I don't really throw away anything. I make a lot of songs, there's songs I've done years ago that are getting love now, you never know what'll happen in the future. Prince, I've been listening to a lot of his stuff and the things that never came out, the B-sides and different things like that, I understand why he didn't put it on the albums.

I was working with Mac Miller—rest in peace—I was working on *Swimming*. One of the songs that I had, we made it, and it was really beautiful. I was kind of removed from the process, so one day the song was on the album, and the next day it wasn't on the album. He was working on *Circles* while he was working on *Swimming*, and he was telling me "It's not going to make this album but, it's going to be on *Circles*." That song still didn't make *Circles*, but what that taught me was just because I'm working on songs for a certain project, it doesn't mean every song is going to make this project. It might be something for later or it might be something used for something else, you know what I mean? Nothing ever gets thrown away, it's gonna be there.

You're a very collaborative artist, and throughout the years you've been working with bigger and bigger artists—for example, Disclosure. I was wondering what the learning curve has been like working with these bigger acts and dealing with the red tape that sometimes comes with those types of collaborations?

That song with Disclosure ["Lavender"], I think I made that song a year and a half ago. I had experience already as a producer, because you'll get in a studio with an artist, you'll make five songs and you don't know what's going to happen when you leave. I've been promised things as a producer like, "Oh, this is going to do this, this is going to do this" and it wouldn't happen. I learned early on in my experience in the music industry, I blocked out my emotion, I just give 100 per cent when I'm in that session. If it makes it, it makes it, if it doesn't, it doesn't, I just let it go.

I was reading a Terrace Martin interview—he's a good friend now—but before I used to watch a lot of his interviews and videos, and he was saying he makes three songs a day no matter what; his goal as a producer was to make three beats a day, three ideas, three anything. That's kind of how I look at it, because when you're making music, you're in the future a lot of the time, you don't know what you're making, what it's going to do. I make beats in five minutes that have been somebody's favorite song on their album and I looked at it as, "Oh this is trash," but I played it for an artist and they loved it, and I got a placement.

What do you look for in a collaborator?

For collaboration: Can we go get lunch? Can we talk? I make the best music with people collaborating if we can talk, if I can be myself. It's kind of like LeBron [James] teaming up with AD [Anthony Davis]; they know that they're both good at their craft, but when they come together, LeBron knows AD is going to take care of his job, AD knows LeBron is going to take care of his job. Just like Shaq and Kobe or like Scottie Pippen and Michael Jordan, they knew when you're collabing with somebody and you know that they're good at what they do, there's certain things you don't have to worry about, there's certain places you can go with your creativity that might be different or might be something better.

You went on tour with Robyn last year, and you've hung out with Elton John and a lot of older artists. What advice have you got from them?

I learned a lot, man, and that could be a whole 'nother interview in itself, but I'll try to put it into a little statement, I'll try to sum it up CNN-style: Take your time, give 100 per cent, and it's not about you. Those are the things I can come up with of the top of my head.

One of the things that I like about your music is that you're drawing on this lineage of Black American music, whether it be Detroit techno and house, whether it be the artists who played [1972 Los Angeles concert] Wattstax, and you're introducing listeners to these genres and artists. Do you feel you have a responsibility to educate younger audiences about these musical histories?

Oh, most definitely, yes. I wouldn't be me without Isaac Hayes, without Barry White, without Marvin Gaye, without Al Green, without Pharell, without Kanye, without Sam Cooke, without Bobby Womack, without Stevie Wonder. The reason I know about all those cats is because the older cats talked to me. You gotta keep it going because being an African-American, I don't really know where I'm from, and we created our own culture through struggle, through marginalization, through slavery, all that shit. I'm convicted about those things. It's not something that I try to do, it naturally comes out of me because that's my lineage.

With the music you've been working on recently, have you learned anything new when it comes to these histories?

I think "Weedman" is a great example, that was the start of me changing. I've been learning just by listening to a lot of George Clinton's records, all the Snoop records, Bootsy Collins, a lot of things I've been learning, getting into character and thinking about voices. I sing really baritone but I can sing high so I'm been practicing my vocals to make it sound like a choir of different people, but it's just me using my different voices. When I'm in the booth, I don't have to be Channel, I can sound like a girl, you know what I'm saying? I've been getting more in touch with my classical background because I'm classically trained, so I've been working with strings and stuff like that.

During the pandemic, you've been doing a lot of livestreamed DJ sets. I saw the one you did with Diplo and the one you did in the back of the convertible. How have you found doing those and has there been any challenges adapting to those platforms?

I started DJing on Ableton in college because that's all I had, but once I dropped "Controller" and started getting around a lot of heads, they were like "We're not going to book him if he's DJing on his laptop" so I learned CDJs. During quarantine I started DJing. I was DJing on my laptop at first, but somebody around the corner from my house had CDJs so I'd just go over to their house and practice. The fact that I was in the back of a convertible DJing off CDJs was a big moment for me as somebody who learnt to DJ from scratch.

The way I look at a DJ set is just me expressing myself, and you have a chance to get into my mind and the music that I like to listen to for an hour or whatever. I don't really play to impress people or play new shit, you're just kind of tapping into my vibe.

Have you watched any artist livestreams lately that really stood out to you?

Honestly, no, I've been off the internet a little bit, but the only person I've been able to watch is Dâm-Funk. I've been watching his old Boiler Room sets, he's got this one Boiler Room set where I guess he's going through his record collection, just playing records. I've been watching a lot of Flying Lotus music videos, because his music videos are really good, and I've been listening to old jazz, Thelonius Monk, and Miles Davis. I might throw on a Theo Parrish set or a Honey Dijon set and I'll sit down, look for songs I haven't heard before on Shazam.

With everything that's happening in the U.S., happening in the world, what's your relationship with social media right now?

I think it's a balance. I've been using it because I definitely still need to communicate with my fans and the people that support me and I'm dropping my music. I try to have a healthy balance with it, because I want to support what my friends are doing, but also I know I'm working on something too so I don't want to be too influenced by social media, having to do something so I can get more likes or something like that.

There was Blackout Tuesday and there's been all these statements coming from labels and people in the music industry in regards to the Black Lives Matter movement—do you buy it? How do you think we can keep holding these people accountable for creating meaningful change?

It's up to us, man. I think it's up to artists. I've started my own label with [Godmode co-founder] Nick [Sylvester], Art For Their Good. That was a big sign to me that I need to step up. One thing I was taught from as a kid was self-advocacy, we give these people power and these people are not in the studio making songs, and they're not going through what we're going through. I think as artists, we have to be ourselves more, and make sure you have healthy people around you. Make sure you make something that you can stand behind 10 years from now. I don't let something come out that I don't like; all my songs that came out, I know five years from now, 10 years from now, I'm going to look back at them and be happy. I'm not really the best person to go to advice for because my advice for everybody is be yourself.

Do you have a five-year plan, or 10-year plan? Do you write down goals or just have them in your head?

I wrote those down before, but I accomplished everything that I wanted, and I'm in the process of writing new goals now. A lot of things are important to me, money's not a goal—I want a Benz, for sure, I think that's going to happen. Sometimes when you achieve things, you realize that the things that you achieve are not really the thing, it's the journey to get there that's magical. So I've been in a place where I've been creating new goals just to experience the journey of getting there.

Channel Tres Recommends:

Meditations by Marcus Aurelius

*Unfu*k Yourself* by Gary John Bishop

The Wayans Bros.

Eating spinach

Meditation

Name

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Vocation

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Fact

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