Cultural Daily

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A Portrait of the Starving Artist as a Young American

Dan Matthews · Wednesday, June 7th, 2017

Recently here on the Cultural Weekly blog, Adam Leipzig made a fine point when he said, if you want to #resist, pay a poet. The prevailing norm in America is to undervalue this thing called poetry and the people who write it. This extends to the rest of the arts. Our president wants to completely defund the arts and cut the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Increasingly, people consume music, poetry, literature, movies, and visual art for free or for the lowest price possible. The situation for the American artist is looking dire at best. There's ample criticism, but very little real support.

Yet, isn't there a case for pulling the money rug out from beneath the artist? French wine gets it famed quality not from easy access to easy soil, but from the struggle the vines must undertake in order to get nutrients in rocky terroir.

Student loan refinancing startup Earnest highlights artists who are using student loans as the "new muse." For these artists, debt is motivational. Soul artist Reesa Renee says, "For me, all I'm saying, in order to get Sallie Mae off my back, is one hit song. One. My immediate this-year type of goal is to get 100,000 people to download my songs, and I don't think it's that outrageous to get that."

Renee is constantly writing and promoting her music in the search for a song that will truly connect with a broad audience. Would she be striving so hard if the demon hounds of capitalism weren't at her heels? Maybe not.

Dee-1

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New Orleans rapper Dee-1 took the artist-and-student-loan-debt issue a step further when he wrote a song about getting out of debt and it went viral. In Dee-1's case, hardship was the muse, just as it was for the early American blues artists. Without those artists and their frank portrayals of struggle, we wouldn't have rap music, nor would we have pretty much all of the popular music you hear today. Hardship brings out the best in humanity's creative spirit.

This isn't an attempt to excuse the poor treatment that led the first blues artists to create blues

music to begin with. Rather, it's a rallying cry. If the establishment doesn't want to support the arts, the artists will find a way to survive, and we'll make better art for it. Early blues artists were black people our society tried to oppress and suppress, but they created a lasting form of expression, effectively demonstrating that bigotry and capitalism couldn't keep them down.

If you think about it, artists are fueling one of the biggest economic trends in America today: telecommuting. More and more people are working from home and abandoning the commute. Artists can do this because of the skills they possess. Of the careers that are great for working from home, two of them are freelance writer and graphic designer. Designers and writers both use creativity and artistic acumen to do their jobs well. If they didn't have to fight to make a living in a cutthroat system, we wouldn't have most of the content you see on the web today.

In particular, writers have to struggle, because all it takes to write is an idea and a pen, neither of which are in short supply.

James Joyce, age six

James Joyce, the Irish writer who penned *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, was no stranger to struggle in his own right. He became one of the most famous writers of the 20th century, yet couldn't find a place to publish *Portrait*, which was his first long work. Then, he published a book of short stories called *Dubliners*, which was an indictment of the stifling environment in Joyce's native city and country. Joyce found society in Dublin to be too religiously oppressive—paralysis is a recurring theme in *Dubliners*. But Joyce wouldn't have become the experimental, groundbreaking, controversial writer he was if the society of his youth hadn't been what it was.

Great artists use adverse conditions to create great art. They feed off the negative space and fill it with a positive example of human ingenuity. Many of us have never felt America to be more of a negative space than it is now. Create great art. It's the best way to #resist.

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