

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Working With Don Was

Mike Ellison · Wednesday, October 23rd, 2013

It's 3:30 am in Detroit. I'm exiting the WDET radio station studio, tucked between Cass and Woodward avenues, alongside a man who created innovative music with his successful band; charted a production resume that reads like the Rock-n-Roll Hall of Fame roster; scored and music directed major motion pictures, and is currently re-energizing a revered record label. Beyond grateful, I thank this man, who won Grammys with the Rolling Stones and Bonnie Raitt, for producing a live recording session that will air on the nationally syndicated [World Café](#) radio program. He counters my gratitude with "No. Thank you, man. Making music in Detroit 'til three in the morning again? This was fun!"

Don Was could, and perhaps should, write a manual for musicians: "How to Be a Rock Star Without Being a Rock Star." He says please and thank you – often. You extend a hand for the customary shake – Don spreads his arms like condor wings for a hug. He pulls up to the studio in a nondescript rental car, having flown commercial into Detroit Metro Airport. Donning a signature wide brim hat, with no entourage or assistant in sight, the [Blue Note](#) president apologizes for moving the session back a few hours later than originally planned, but only one flight from Los Angeles would allow him to honor a family commitment. Then the [Was \(Not Was\)](#) co-founder says with an ambitious grin, "Let's make some music."

I have WDET radio host and popular media personality, Ann Delisi, to thank for this incredible collaboration. Ann is regal, with a voice for radio and a face for television. A true music aficionado, her playlists cross every genre imaginable. She answered the call to host my performance for the 21st [Annual Concert of Colors](#), a free, four-day citywide music festival produced by the Arab American National Museum. I've been honored to headline opening night, held at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, for the past three years. Ann shockingly showed up with Don, who was in town to close out the festival with his All-Star Revue, a parade of live performances that completely defies conventional categorization. I don't think the multi-instrumentalist takes a conventional approach to anything.

Don sat front row at the Wright Museum for the entire production, a blend of my original music and interpretations of John Coltrane, Donald Byrd, Paul Robeson, and The Diablos; interspersed with traditional African drum and dance, interpretive choreography and hip-hop culture; woven together with music history. Thirty-seven people were involved. As we're taking post show photographs in the museum's majestic rotunda, my manager, Aimee Spencer, pulled me aside. "Don Was is waiting backstage. He'd like to meet you."

"He's waiting ... for me?" I replied in disbelief. We rounded the backstage hallway and there he was, condor wings wide.

"That was the best concert I've seen in the last ten years," he proclaimed. "Seriously. I know what it takes to get that many people on the same page."

Years of sacrifice, self-doubt and slammed doors disappear when a highly respected pioneer gives you the proverbial nod and a pat on the back that propels you onward to create another day.



A few weeks later, while in LA, Don invited me to drop by a session at [Mix This](#), headquarters of heralded engineer, mixer and producer, Bob Clearmountain. Sitting poolside at this beautiful facility that feels like a tropical resort, Don was candid and wildly engaging, offering fascinating anecdotes of personal struggle and success. The two consistent motifs were truth and music. He shared a recent conversation with Bob Dylan regarding the ethos of artistry that could be an article or perhaps a book unto itself.

Then politely turning the topic to me he curiously inquired, “Tell me your story.”

I was born in Ethiopia to African-American parents living and working in Addis Ababa; raised in Reston, VA; graduated from the University of Virginia; moved to Detroit for work in the professional sports field, learned from invaluable experiences yet felt unfulfilled.

Excelling in some endeavors, failing miserably in others, I staggered around Motown in a creative coma until performing at open mic venues, acting in Detroit Repertory and Plowshares Theatre productions, recording music in the home studios of fellow aspiring musicians, and encountering a cascade of gifted singers, rappers, writers, painters, poets, and musicians that inspired, encouraged, challenged and ultimately transformed me into an artist.

Years of grinding yielded opening act opportunities, repeat appearances on HBO’s Def Poetry; film, theatre and television acting credits; national tours in association with non-profits like the American Cancer Society; independent albums and volunteerism with organizations working to improve healthcare in my native Ethiopia. The country’s gorgeous landscape, people, culture and history enriched my life in profound fashion, as did Detroit.

He listened with interest, occasionally requesting elaboration. Our meeting drew to a close, and as if foreshadowing the forthcoming World Café recording like a film plot point, he saluted. “This should be fun!” he said. It was. Big fun.

Don Was produces artists they way Phil Jackson coaches basketball players. His process is entirely organic. With a palpable, contagious enthusiasm calmly concealed beneath his thick bohemian beard, Don enters the live room like a soft-spoken Sensei, inspiring you to search your soul and deliver from the depths of your emotions and earthly existence. The genre-jumping producer’s insights are simple, concise, poignant and assuring.

When my music director and I contemplate playing another take, Don saunters out of the control room and says with poetic ease, “We got it. That was f*cking great.”

When we’ve tracked the last song, like a kid who can’t wait for Christmas morning to open gifts, Don urges, “Let’s just mix everything right now.” We do, on a Pro Tools rig devoid of plug-ins. Don digs the raw, live, throwback sound.

When we collectively consider editing a mistake, “Let’s keep it,” he advises. “It happened.”

Don is right. It happened. It’s 3:30 am in Detroit and I just worked with a legend. #damn.

Photos: Top, Mike Ellison; below, Don Was.

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