

Sound Expertise Season 3:12 –

Hip-Hop and Friendship on Death Row with Alim Braxton and Mark Katz

Transcribed by Andrew Dell'Antonio

Alim Braxton 00:00

My personality is shaped by this culture of Hip-Hop. So the way that I talk, if I'm chillin' with my homeboys, and the slang that we use, it's all a byproduct of what I've learned from Hip Hop. My posture, the way that I move, or the way that I gesticulate, the way that I walk, it might have a little bop to it, or some swag, or whatever. So all of this is shaped by Hip Hop.

[Music] 00:29

Will Robin 00:51

Welcome back to Sound Expertise. I'm your host, Will Robin. And this is a podcast where I talk to my fellow music scholars about their research, and why it matters. So today's episode is the story of a friendship. It's an unlikely story, both because we don't typically associate musicological research with the idea of friendship, and because of the very different statures of the two friends, musicologist Mark Katz, who is John P. Barker Distinguished Professor of Music at UNC Chapel Hill, and rapper Alim Braxton, who is on death row in Central Prison in North Carolina, and has been incarcerated since 1993. I'm going to keep this intro brief because pretty much everything you need to know about this episode is told in the episode itself, but I do want to say a few things up front. First, that Mark was my advisor for my dissertation, and is a wonderful and generous scholar and mentor. Second, that though I had heard about and read about Alim before, and listened to the great music he has recorded as Rome Alone, this conversation was the first time we had communicated directly. And finally, that there is a clear and emphatic difference of power and privilege between Mark and me and Alim, as you can hear audibly in this episode, because Alim will periodically be cut off by the prison's phone system and need to call back. What you won't hear is that this episode almost didn't happen. Because earlier this year, the prison began unconstitutionally limiting inmates' ability to speak with outside media, though fortunately this was resolved by the time we spoke in May. I think you will find this conversation deeply moving. It's about making Hip Hop in prison, about the ethics of collaboration, and I think most importantly, about what friendship means.

[Music] 02:40

Will Robin 02:53

So I'd like to start with a somewhat simple question, although I know it's going to yield a fairly complex answer, which is, how did the two of you become friends?

Alim Braxton 03:06

Well, yes, it's kind of a lengthy story. I'll condense it to the best of my capability. I saw Mark in a newspaper article in the local News and Observer. And at the time, he was conducting a teaching project where he had producers that were teaching kids in the community how to make beats in the UNC beat lab. And it just so happened at that time that I had been looking for someone who could put beats to my acapella vocals. I had connected with a person named Michael Betts who is also a good friend of mine now, who was an assistant professor at UNC Wilmington. And he was recording my acapella lyrics over the phone and posting them on SoundCloud. And several people had been commenting that they liked my rhymes, but the only thing I needed was some beats. So I had taken a couple of attempts of trying to connect with some producers. But the production that I had gotten, I never was able to hear it before it was released. And when I finally heard it, it sounded not up to professional standards. So I was in the need of a producer. So when I saw Mark in the paper, I said -- I'm gonna take a shot at writing him and asking him, with the beat lab, Hip Hop producers, maybe he knows a producer that can help me in making some beats for my acapella rhymes. So I wrote to him in -- I want to say maybe August or September 2019. And after a couple of months, he responded back and we just began a correspondence of back-and-forth letters and the first letter that he sent me was on a post card, he just mentioned that he listened to some of my music on SoundCloud and thought, as well, that I needed some beats. And that he might be able to introduce me to some producers. And that's how our friendship began.

Will Robin 05:14

Wonderful. Yeah.

Mark Katz 05:16

And then I'll add a little bit at first, of course, when we were just corresponding, and when I got the letter from him, I didn't know what to do with it. And that's why it took me a long time to respond, because I didn't know who Alim was. And I got this letter that stamped central prison. And I see this letter saying - - I want to introduce myself, I'm on death row, and I'm trying to find someone to help me with my music. And so I really had to think for a while, what would it mean to respond? What would it mean to say yes. And I did, in part because I really felt his sincerity come through this letter, also, in part, just out of curiosity -- this sounds fascinating, this sounds like a really interesting project. So let's see what happens. And I did know a lot of producers, and I thought someone might want to work with him. And this never had to develop into a friendship, but it did. And I think it's just because we clicked in terms of personalities and interests, even though we come from very different backgrounds in all sorts of ways. And I just remember very clearly a letter, we were mostly writing back and forth with some calls. He wrote a letter and signed it your friend. And so I thought, well, let me just ask him, What does that mean? I said -- I'm glad you said that, because I kind of think of you as my friend too, what does it mean to you? And I think the fact that we're friends is actually really important to my scholarship, because I don't think I could have Alim's trust to work with him in the way that I do if I weren't friends with him, or if he didn't see me as a friend. And he defined for me -- a friend is someone who has your back, someone who you can trust. And so I really can't separate my friendship with him from the scholarly work, and musical work that we do.

Will Robin 07:35

Alim, after this initial exchange of a letter and a postcard, what was the correspondence like with Mark, where did you get to the point where you felt that you were trusting of him and wanted to call him your friend?

Alim Braxton 07:51

It was just a natural evolution, like Mark said, I guess our personalities just clicked. And he started, he would write me and just prompt me with certain questions. And I did have a desire at the time to share about the process of recording this music, because I did feel like it was something that was important. To my knowledge, no one ever in the history of recorded music has recorded any music on death row. So I did feel like it was important. So sometimes Mark would just prod me with questions about the process, and then the natural evolution of things as I just began to start confiding in him and talking about other things outside of music. And it got to a point where I was like -- I want to know a little more about you, as well. And when seeing the willingness to reciprocate, to open up and share things about his life as well, it just continued to reinforce a relationship of trust. And I just told him, friendship to me means having your back, and that I know, and you can know, I'm gonna always have your back. So that's kind of how it evolved from my perspective.

Mark Katz 09:19

Yeah, and I think part of it was my natural curiosity as a scholar, or just natural curiosity and then my scholarly inclinations kicked in. And so I just asked him... I first asked, I said -- Do you mind if I ask you some questions? And he said -- Sure. And so I just kept sending questions, like -- What is music like on death row? How do you make music? Are there other rappers? And I learned about his life and started to ask other questions, like -- how do you celebrate Ramadan at central prison, and so on and so on. And I think he could have been annoyed by that or just not responded. But Alim is just incredibly intellectually curious about things and loves to learn and read. So I think that's our commonality and of course, Hip Hop. And I think for me, that's also part of the story.

Will Robin 10:23

Mark shared some of the really eloquent letters that you exchanged back and forth. And at one point, he asks you what Hip Hop means to you, and Alim, you write -- Hip Hop is my life. Can you talk a little bit about what that means, why Hip Hop is your life and your history with Hip Hop as well?

Alim Braxton 10:41

My life, and so many of my memories, are marked by Hip Hop, as I mentioned, in that letter that you speak of, I can often remember the first time I had a bomber jacket, or the time when I used to go to Sportsworld and breakdance, or the first time I had my first record, and the turntable that my mom bought me for, it was either my birthday or Christmas, it was a little Welcome Back Kotter turntable. And so many things that are connected with my memories are marked by Hip Hop, I can mark a day and time by saying what year the song came up. So I have an idea of where I was, what I was doing, what year it was, such and such was going on, based on certain songs that came out. So that's how I've marked time throughout my life. But in addition to that, my personality is shaped by this culture of Hip Hop. So the way that I talk, if I'm chillin' with my homeboys, and the slang that we use, it's all a byproduct of what I've learned from Hip Hop. My posture, the way that I move, or the way that I gesticulate, the way that I walk, it might have a little bop to it, or some swag, or whatever. So all of this

is shaped by Hip Hop. It's my fashion, even in a way that I might wear my shoes maybe untied, or I might wear my jumpsuit a little baggy it's all a part of how Hip Hop has affected me. Even to my internal dialogue, that I hear, the voice in your head that talks to you, it's got a Hip Hop voice, occasionally I can switch modes and get into an intellectual voice, but most of the time, it's that Hip Hop voice talking to me. And so, when I say Hip Hop is my life, it's that I can't really see no disconnect in how I separate who I am from the way that Hip Hop has impacted me.

Will Robin 12:49

And you've been in prison now for more than 25 years, right? What has your relationship been to Hip Hop since your imprisonment as well?

Alim Braxton 12:59

From a creative aspect -- I'm a rapper, I'm an MC, I've been writing lines since I was 13. But since I've been in prison, I've really buckled down and honed some of my skills as a writer as an MC. And that primarily took place while I was doing time in solitary, I did about 10 years in solitary. And I had a stretch while I did seven and a half years straight. And it was during that particular time, that I began to use rap, use writing Hip Hop lyrics as a form of therapy. And ... [interrupted]

Electronic Voice 13:35

you have 60 seconds remaining.

Alim Braxton 13:38

... that became, that developed a huge part of my early catalog as a writer.

Will Robin 13:46

I know you're about to be disconnected, Alim, and so you'll call back, hopefully, and we'll keep talking.

[Music] 13:53

Will Robin 13:56

Hello, again.

Alim Braxton 13:58

Hello.

Will Robin 14:01

I wanted to ask about... You have this exchange of letters, and you're hoping Mark can help you find a producer to make beats for you to rap over. So how did that process unfold? How did you find a producer? And what did that collaboration first look like and sound like?

Alim Braxton 14:19

Mark connected me with Nick Neutronz, in my opinion, one of the greatest producers I had ever heard. And he initially, I guess, reached out to Nick. And on my end, told me that he had made the connection and sent me Nick's phone number. And I called him and talked to him a little bit. And initially it was kind

of shaky, the ground of us just establishing some type of method of recording because all this was new, not only to me, but to Nick as well. And so we had technology boundaries, we had access to music and technology and resources. And you know, my ability to hear music, all of those things were boundaries. And so just due to the process of just my determination, and a little bit of ingenuity, we developed a process where we were able to work through zoom, which was something that I figured out, because one of the big obstacles was -- I had made a lot through trial-and-error experimentation, because one of the initial hurdles was, how can I hear the music so that I can rap in time? Many of my acapella rhymes Michael Betts would post on SoundCloud for me, but I learned from what producers would later tell me that we kind of got an internal rhythm, so that my internal rhythm might fluctuate, sometimes I might go a little faster, sometimes I might go a little slower, although I'm thinking I'm rapping in perfect time. So it was difficult for them to take my acapella and just put it onto a track. But then I've also learned, in addition to that -- that's probably an element that they could have worked around, but because they don't know specifically where I'm coming in on the beat, it's awkward. And so it's a communication barrier as well, not being able to explain if I'm coming in on the one, or two, or three, or two and a half, or whatever -- where I'm starting off with my vocals on the track. So it made it almost impossible for a producer to figure out how to put my lyrics on a time track. So those was all obstacles that we had to try to overcome. So I was watching TV, it was around the time of the pandemic, I met Nick, I talked to him probably for about the first time maybe November, December of 2019. But we didn't really start working until about January of 2020. And then after that COVID happened. And it was during COVID, that Zoom became one of the few mediums for people to continue to have business meetings, as well as engage with friends and families, etc. And so it was on TV all the time, you would see these shows or these little broadcasts where they got a Zoom meeting and somebody got a filter on it, got their face looking like a cat or something, and they don't know how to turn it off, and they're on a group meeting. And this is funny for all of the people that are watching it. But to me, I was looking at it from the perspective of -- man, maybe I can use this type of technology to figure out how to overcome these hurdles for recording, maybe I can hear the beep. So I'm thinking, if it's possible to do these group chats like this, on zoom, then perhaps a person who has music on their computer can allow everybody on the Zoom chat to hear the music simultaneously. And if that's the case, maybe we can isolate a vocal as well. So just my thought process about where the possibilities might be, I had those conversations with Michael Betts as well as Nick. And it turned out to be that was the solution that enabled me to be able to hear the beat. So then Nick played a beat to me straight from zoom, and I could hear it on the phone, and I could rap on time. But there's a there's a time delay. It might be one second or half a second, or whatever it is, between the time that the beat is played and the time I hear it. And then there's another time delay from the time that I speak to the time that the listener hears. So that created another disconnect, so that when I'm rapping, although I'm rapping in time, it's not synchronized with the beat. So then we had to figure out how to explain, which was a hurdle for me because I hadn't been educated in the etiquette of a recording studio and working with a producer. So I didn't know the language. I didn't know how to explain what the one is, what vocal I'm coming in on, or what bar it is, or what beat I'm coming in. So that was a communication barrier. So it was just a continual process of figuring it out, and developing this communication language, until things began to continue to unfold. And I thank Nick Neutronz -- like I said, he's one of the greatest producers I've ever heard, but also for having the patience, the persistence to continue to work to figure this out, despite all the obstacles and we've made some pretty impressive accomplishments since then.

Will Robin 20:03

I've heard a lot of your songs and they're fantastic. And the process behind it is really fascinating. Mark, can you talk a little bit about once Alim has recorded these and he's worked with Nick, how you were working to get Alim's music out into the world?

Mark Katz 20:20

Well, there's a whole team that works with Alim, and we call ourselves the Alim team. And so we all have different roles. So Nick is a producer, Michael Betts is a documentarian who does audio, I'm the scholar, but I would call myself an executive producer because I raise money for these projects. We also have Tessie Castillo, who's a journalist, and also a rapper named Wordsmith joined in a little later. He's from Baltimore. So it's really the whole team that has worked on this in various ways. We use different platforms, Facebook, SoundCloud, Spotify, iTunes, but I will say, that is probably the Alim team's weak point is in terms of promotion and social media. And so this is something that we're actually actively working on. And we just brought on someone who's a student at UNC, who specializes in advertising and knows TikTok and social media platforms very well, and actually has raised money to hire a professional PR firm for the book and the album. So I will say it's been a bunch of non-experts [laughs] we're all good at various aspects, we each have our strengths, but where we need to get some professional help is in getting the word out. And that is actually something that we're working on now.

Will Robin 22:15

I want to talk about the book in a minute. But Alim, could you also talk just a little bit about what musical life is like for you in prison? How do you listen to music? Where do you get your ideas for your raps? Where do you practice them? That kind of thing.

Alim Braxton 22:34

My musical access has been extremely limited for the vast majority of my imprisonment. So I've been in prison for 30 years now. And for at least the first 29 of those years, the only access that I've had to music has been AM/FM radio, never had a cassette player, never had a record player, never had a CD, never had an mp3 player, it was just the AM/FM radio until 2022, when we were able to get tablets. So my access to music was just from whatever was played on the radio. So that gave me a very, very small window of what music was available out there — so small that I had some extreme distortions about the type of Hip Hop that was being made, because I only had access to so little that was available. But in 2022 the prisons in North Carolina, they began implementing the tablet program. And so with the tablets, we do have access to more music, we have a music app on the tablet, Stingray music app, that gives us a broader selection of music. And although I can't specifically choose what song I want to listen to, I can pick a station, and just listen to what is on that station, I could skip if I don't like that song, etc. So that's been a huge evolution, a giant leap from the limited access that I had to music to a much greater pool of music that I now have access to. So that's how my access to music has been. As far as my creativity and what has inspired me and how I have come up with ideas about what to write about, most of it, as I mentioned, initially, was therapeutic. So a lot of my early music was talking about me, my life, my thoughts, my experiences, my feelings, it was giving the opportunity to figure myself out, figure out things that troubled me — a lot of emotional trauma and psychological trauma that I had dealt with, that I may have suppressed. And so just to be creative, and to bring it outside of myself and put it into an artistic way that helped me to cope with those things — that helped

me to express it and to be able to recite it to myself so that it became easier to cope with. But then eventually gradually I was inspired by some of the Hip Hop that I had been exposed to earlier, growing up in life, as well as to some Hip Hop that I've heard since I've been in prison on the radio. So like artists, like Common, for instance, I used to love him. And then when I first heard that song, I just loved the way that he used metaphor to describe Hip Hop, like a young girl that he fell in love with. And then throughout the whole song he's making this metaphor, but you find out he's actually talking about Hip Hop. So when I heard that song, for the first time, it gave me a view and a capability in saying — Hey, man, I can use this art to do things that I never imagined, that don't just happen to be raps about — I'm this I'm that braggadocio, but it can also be something that's artful and creative. But then I was heavily influenced by other rappers like Chuck D or KRS-one who were more about educating or putting the message into their music. So it was things like this I've strongly gravitated towards and wanted to write about. So a lot of the early music that I wrote about was things that talked about imprisonment, or talk about the political effects of incarceration or consequences of incarceration, and things that just dealt with my unique experience of being on death row. Because for a huge part I felt like this was a subject matter that hadn't been discussed in Hip Hop, specifically from someone who lived it. So that definitely drove a lot of my creativity.

Will Robin 26:45

I know prior to you receiving the tablets in September 2021, was the first time you were able to actually hear one of your produced songs on the radio, rather than through the phone. Do you remember what that experience was like, of hearing your music on the radio?

Electronic Voice 27:03

You have 60 seconds remaining.

Will Robin 27:05

So maybe we'll table that question.

[Music] 27:06

Alim Braxton 27:11

Yeah, it was mindblowing. That experience was just so surreal, but it was also chaotic at the same time. I had let share word with a few people that the song would be on the radio. So those few people shared with a few more people. And those few people shared with a few more, so it was like everybody was listening. And, in addition, at the time I had actually called into the radio station. And so they had me on the radio while the song was being played. So I didn't really want to be on the radio, I want to have the luxury of being in my cell, listening to the song in my headphones, so that I could hear it. So I didn't have that full effect of hearing the song for the first time that it was played on the radio. But the second time it was played on the radio, that's exactly what happened. I was in my cell, I had nobody, no distractions, nobody talking to me, nothing. And to hear my music for the first time. It was just like — Man, I can't believe that not only did we accomplish this, but it sounded so good. Because I had never heard it before, all the renditions that I had heard was just through the phone. So I always had a limited perception of how the music actually sounded. There were so many aspects of the production in the beat that I had never heard before because they just don't translate when you listen through the phone.

So hearing all of that, the pristine quality of the production, I was just blown away by Nick Neutronz's production. First of all, I was like, wow, this is amazing. But then, in addition — that's me! That's me, and I'm on the radio! And I've always feared that the vocal quality because it was on the phone would be so inferior, and it will be garbled. It would sound like some garage music or sound like something done on a Fisher Price toy or something. But it wasn't that bad. And it actually sounded intentional, because of the song being — it was "Live on Death Row." And the concept of the song, it sounded intentional, and it sounded really good. And so I felt so pleased. I felt so proud. I felt so accomplished that we had actually done something and I got to hear it for the first time. And it was just a huge moment of great joy that I'll never be able to forget. I know I've heard other artists talk about the first time that they ever heard themselves on the radio And I got that experience too. And it's just, it's something that I just never envisioned, especially from coming in prison and being on death row, to hear myself on the radio. And to see that we were able to create something despite all of the obstacles and it sounded good.

Will Robin 30:20

So you have this developing friendship over the last few years and these collaborations, but there's also a book that you were working on together. Mark, can you talk a little bit about how a more traditional scholarly project came out of this, and what the goal is with this book, and what it is?

Mark Katz 30:37

I got that first letter from Alim in August 2019. And we started up a correspondence and every letter that arrived was an event, he would tell me that a letter was coming, and I would run out to the mailbox and get it and read it right away, because every letter is just so beautifully written and evocative. And I almost felt like I was seeing through his eyes, because of his really vivid writing. And as I was reading this, I just kept thinking -- I want other people to see this. This is amazing. Of course, I wasn't going to share things without his permission. And I did ask his permission, there were a few things specifically about music, where I asked if I could share them with students, and the students were really taken with these letters. "That's one of the most moving things I've ever heard," I remember one of my students saying, so actually, the very first time I visited Alim in person, I said -- I just want to let you know, I'm preserving these letters. I'm scanning them, I'm copying them, I'm logging them, I think they're really valuable. Part of this is me as a scholar, but also I just think these are amazing letters. And I think they should be preserved. And then eventually, I pitched the idea. I said -- what do you think about making this into a book? I don't know, maybe Alim wants to take it from there. But I do remember his response, at first he just kind of stared at me and didn't say anything. But Alim, do you want to take it from there?

Alim Braxton 32:41

Yeah. I remember the actual word that you used, you said that you viewed my letters as documents that needed to be preserved. And it was that word, document, because I never imagined -- I never thought about a letter that I wrote as being a document -- a document, to me, it gave it some type of importance -- the Declaration of Independence is a document, the Constitution is a document. It's preserved for progeny, for the future to see and access. So, to use that type of phraseology in talking about a letter that I wrote, it made my words and my thoughts seem so more important than I had imagined that they may be. So I never intended to write a book. And so when Mark mentioned to me the idea of -- you've written me X amount of letters, and I scan each one of them, and so many word

count, etc. -- that's the whole book right there. And this just blew my mind, because this was never my intention. I had never set out with the intention to write a book, and so when Mark mentioned I was -- okay, all right, well, yeah, let's write a book. But that wasn't something that I was pursuing, because it was never something that I set out to do. So it just became as like a byproduct of our relationship and our correspondence. So even though it began to gradually build momentum, to me it was still a secondary thing, or even maybe even lower than secondary, because my goal was to try to create this music and as a byproduct of that, to try to generate attention for people who are wrongfully convicted and innocent on death row, such as my friend, Stacey Savoy Tyler, who was a huge inspiration for the work that I've been doing with this music. So that's been my original goal. That's what I've been striving for. So it was never my intention to write a book. So I've never really invested a lot of thought in it. I was like -- Yeah, sure, let's put a book together. And it wasn't until much later when Mark actually sent me a manuscript of what was going to be in the book that now I'm reading the letters that I have written. Because once I write a letter, and I send it out, I forgot what I said, maybe three or four days later, maybe a week later, I don't remember every word that I'm saying, or the topics of discussions, etc. But seeing it in a manuscript, then it was like -- wow, this *is* a book. And then it became a lot more real to me. And now I am actually kind of excited about the idea of -- man, we got a book coming together. So that's my experience with it.

Will Robin 35:49

Mark, how are you thinking about ... reflecting on the the potential ethical issues that a project like this raises the power dynamics, being a full professor at a prestigious university, working with a collaborator who is imprisoned? How have you pondered that and grappled with that?

Mark Katz 36:15

I think about it all the time. But I would say more importantly, I talk about it all the time with Alim. So I would say in terms of my scholarly life, this is one of the most important things or maybe I'll just say the most important thing I've done, because it has really challenged my thinking as a scholar, my thought about what a scholar is and can do, what it means to collaborate, but also just thinking about these very difficult dynamics, that the power dynamic, it is a very asymmetrical power relationship. And yet as friends, we're equals as friends, you don't have a friendship where one person is more important than the other, it doesn't work that way. But at the same time, I have privilege, I have status, I have funding, I have connections. But I get so much out of my work with Alim that in no way is this me doing favors. So I would describe this in scholarly terms as continuous informed consent. So it's not just that I just asked for his permission to do X, I'm constantly going back to him and asking, because things are always changing and evolving. And one of the really both challenging and fascinating aspects of this is where in our relationship that power asymmetry calls attention to itself. And, one example is that I connected him with a composer who was looking to hire someone to write some rap for a musical, and it seemed very promising and Alim was really thrilled about the possibility. Then it turned out this guy was really not serious about this, and was, at least from my standpoint, or actually I think from Alim's standpoint also, exploiting him. And but then Alim wrote me a letter that was really powerful, that said, we are not equal, and that even though I know I'm being exploited, I don't have the luxury of not being exploited. And from my standpoint, that was a really eye opening, but also very challenging situation, because how do I collaborate with someone who is essentially asking me to allow himself to be exploited? How do I recognize his agency, but also treat him as a friend? And the answer is, there isn't a good answer,

but we talk about it. And I will say, in my teaching, because I'm also teaching a class and Alim has called in a number of times, we talk about these issues. So, part of this also has been struggling openly with students and other scholars about the ethics of working with incarcerated people.

Will Robin 39:47

Alim, do you have any thoughts to add about that?

Alim Braxton 39:50

Yeah, exactly - I want to piggyback on a couple of things. That's one of the things that I do admire and respect about Mark so much is because he's constantly asking me if he has my permission to do this, or does he have my permission to do that? And I feel like I've given him blanket permission upfront, whatever you need to you feel free to do so, I trust you. But it's not like that he's gonna take advantage, he's shown me that he's not going to just say -- Well, you told me I could do whatever, pretty much, and just do it. He'll come back and remind me, and give me opportunity to make the decision...

Electronic Voice 40:32

you have 60 seconds remaining,

Alim Braxton 40:34

... that I hadn't really foreseen. I had told him before, always talking about the manuscript, about the book, and I said -- man, I ain't worried about it, put it together, however you think is fit, I trust your judgment, etc. I don't have no problems with it. And he said -- No, I want you to read it and see if this is what you want us to publish. And so when he did send it to me I realized -- Hey, I'm glad he did, I had some reservations about some things, because the way that I ...

Electronic Voice 41:02

you have 30 seconds remaining.

Alim Braxton 41:04

... just intended for Mark and not intended for an audience greater than him. So that just reinforced my trust in him, and his ability to ... his willingness to give me opportunities to express some type of opinion about things. In addition, Mark, you said, about the exploitation. What I said was, I didn't have the luxury of being angry.

Mark Katz 41:34

He got cut off, he'll call back.

[Music] 41:40

Mark Katz 41:40

Are you there Alim?

Alim Braxton 41:42

Yeah

Will Robin 41:43

I don't know if you had any more to add about what you were saying, or if that was the end of your thoughts.

Alim Braxton 41:48

Yeah, I do. I do. I just want to say, what I was expressing about the situation, when he introduced me to the proposal. Mark actually said, when he was just speaking, that I said that I didn't have the luxury of not being exploited. But what I actually said was -- Mark was pretty upset about the way that that situation played out. And I didn't feel the same type of anger. And I told him that I didn't have the luxury of being angry. Because what I meant is that I don't have the freedom to express anger. Where I am, anger is punished, if you display any type of anger or even displeasure with something, then you're punished for it. So I don't have that luxury, but to see Mark's anger on my behalf, and him expressing it to me, as well as to the composer, is that that really reinforced again, the fact that this dude really got my back. And this is what friendship was about, this is what I told him how I thought friendship. So he was willing to go to bat and express the fact that, I'm upset, I'm angry with you on the way that you tried to deal with this situation regarding Alim. And that really meant a lot to me, even though I felt like in my situation that I would have dealt with the indignity of how the situation was played out, the exploitation or seeming exploitation that may have happened, and would have still been willing to participate, nonetheless, is that my friend didn't feel that the way that I was handled was worthy of my dignity. And so that meant a lot to me. And it was a huge disappointment, but at the same time, as I mentioned to Mark, is that I would have still done it the same way, either way.

Will Robin 43:45

How would you say that this friendship has changed each of you both as people and also as musicologists and musicians?

Mark Katz 43:56

I'll go ahead. It's intertwined the personal and the scholarly. Just personally, I was always against the death penalty. And I was aware, at least to a certain extent, of the injustices within the criminal system. So my mind wasn't changed about that. But I had only a superficial understanding, and knowing someone who's living this, I really got a much better understanding of what's going on and just really how terrible this system is. We are torturing millions of people and exploiting them and their families. Also, I've been someone who has kind of reflected on privilege, but this has deepened that. So it's made me much more aware of reality, of politics, but also I've become... I have a new friend, and my wife was saying -- Oh, it's so nice, you have a new friend. Just on that aspect, it has nothing to do with anything scholarly, I've gotten to know his mother, his wife, his brother... it's affected me personally. As a scholar, it's something I'm starting to develop, a kind of ethics of friendship, meaning that when I think about how to act... how this relationship will best work, it's not as a relationship between a scholar and a subject, if you want to put it that way, but as a relationship between two friends, and I think I have been able to hold myself to a higher ethical standard by asking not what would an ethical scholar do, but what would a friend do? And so it's really informed the way I think about scholarly ethics.

Alim Braxton 46:08

Yeah, that's beautifully put. From my perspective, I always look at what Mark was just saying, from the perspective of how I benefit from my friendship, so to hear, and to feel that validation, that I have something of value to offer to a friend, to this relationship definitely is reassuring. Because of my imprisonment, because of my experiences in life, the crimes that I've been convicted of, and that I'm guilty of, it definitely marks me in a way with shame, and a feeling of not being worthy of other people's recognition. So, to have someone that does not have any obligation, such as my family etc, to extend an offer of friendship and genuinely find value in something that I have to give, especially when I've been made to feel like I have very little to offer, is extremely validating. From my perspective, I've learned so much from Mark, just being and having proximity to the world that he has access to, he's taught me so many things, about how the way things work. And I get the privilege and the benefit of peeping into the mind of a scholar, by saying -- what is this like? Or, what do you do when this situation happens? Or, how do these functions actually pan out? It gives me that access to a world that, under normal conditions, as a person like me, I would never be able to imagine what it would be like, to be in that world. So, it's funny, because a lot of times we might talk and I'll say -- maybe one day I might have my cardigan on, and we'll sit together and, you know what I'm sayin', smoke our pipes and talk about intellectual endeavors. And he's saying, yeah, because he called me a scholar too. So it's awesome to just be able to have that proximity and to benefit from someone like Mark.

Will Robin 48:43

Well, thank you. Before we wrap up, Mark mentioned before you logged on, that you've been thinking a lot about rap versions of country songs. And I was just wondering if you could tell us a little bit about that, or give us a sample if you're willing. It sounds like a fun, cool project.

Alim Braxton 49:00

Oh, yeah, man. So that's, something that's like, really, really fresh. I've been a country music fan since about 2006. I stumbled upon it at the time, I just felt in my life at the time that Hip Hop was a little stuck in the mud. I wasn't very inspired by what I was hearing on the radio. And I just wanted something with a little bit more substance. I was listening for something that spoke to me. And so just traveling down the dial tone, I stumbled upon some country music. At first I went to rock, but I learned that rock was a little bit more about the instruments than it was about the lyrics, at least from what I've heard. So I'm a lyricist. I'm an MC I want to hear messages. I want to hear words, I want to hear a story. So I stumbled on country around 2006, like I said, and I just felt so moved by some of the country music, the things that were being said. So that inspired me in a huge way, because I wanted to take some of those stories, some of those messages, the themes and the concepts, the creativity and how they told those stories, and expose them to Hip Hop audiences, because I felt like they were great stories, and a great story is a great story, regardless of what audience it is. But I knew that there was a boundary with the sound. Hip Hop audiences are attracted to -- 808, heavy basslines, big drums, and not necessarily fiddles, and banjo, so just the instrumentation was a barrier. So I wanted to do something that could expose those stories to Hip Hop audiences. So it just came upon me recently, I said -- What if I could take a country song and do a cover in a Hip Hop style, that might take a great song and translate it and expose it to a Hip Hop audience. So this is fresh, brand new, it's not even a week old in my conception. And to my knowledge, I don't know if anybody has done that thus far. So in my first stab at it, I took one of my favorite country songs by Montgomery Gentry called "Lucky Man," and interpreted into a Hip Hop version. So I'll give you a few bars of that.

Will Robin 51:23

Please!

Alim Braxton 51:24

It goes like this: // I have days when I hate my job / this little town and the whole world too / last Sunday when the Panthers lost / you know that put me in a bad mood. / I have moments when I curse the rain, then complain when the sun's too hot. / I look around at what everyone has / and I forget about all I've got. / But I know I'm a lucky lucky lucky man / God's given me a pretty fair hand / Got a house and a piece of land / \$2 in the coffee can / My old truck truck truck's still running good / my ticker's tick tickin' like they say it should / I got supper in the oven and a good woman's lovin' and got one more day to be my little kid's dad / So Lord knows I'm a lucky man / I know God loves me, man. / Every time I leave my family, / they run up and hug me man. / Sometimes I have my moments / when life seems ugly man, / but when I count my blessings, / how I feel so lucky man. / Got some friends who will be here fast. / I could call 'em any time of day. / Got a brother who's got my back. / Got a mama who I swear's a saint. / Got a brand new rod and reel / Got a full week of golf this year. / Dad had a close call last spring. / It's a miracle he's still here. But I know I'm a lucky lucky lucky man / God's given me a pretty pretty fair hand / Got a house and a piece of land / \$2 in the coffee can / My old truck truck truck's still running good / my ticker's tick tickin' like they say it should / I got supper in my oven, got a good woman's lovin' and got one more day to be my little kid's dad / So I know I'm a lucky man. // So that's just a little iteration of a new song I've been working on. And I actually just recorded that today with my producer Nick Neutronz, so maybe it'll actually be heard some day on on the internet.

Will Robin 53:08

Wow. Well, thank you. That was amazing. Thank you so much for speaking with me, Alim.

Alim Braxton 53:12

Thank you.

Will Robin 53:13

And thank you, Mark as well.

Mark Katz 53:15

Yeah, thank you, Will, it's been great talking with you. And yeah, thanks Alim for making the time.

Will Robin 53:22

Thank you both. I really appreciate it.

Alim Braxton 53:24

All right. Peace!

[Music] 53:26

Will Robin 53:32

Thank you to Alim Braxton and Mark Katz for that fascinating and important conversation. You can read more about their work and listen to Alim's music on our website, soundexpertise.org. As always, our inbox is open, email soundexpertise00@gmail.com if you have any questions or thoughts about the show, or find me on Twitter or Instagram @seatedovation. I'd also be really grateful if you left a review of our show on Apple podcasts, that will help people find the program. And as always, many thanks to D. Edward Davis for his production work, you can check out his music on SoundCloud at [warmsilence](https://www.soundcloud.com/warmsilence). I'm grateful to Andrew Dell'Antonio for transcribing our episodes to make them more accessible. This episode of Sound Expertise was recorded at the National Foreign Language Center with support from University of Maryland School of Music. Next week on Sound Expertise: Curating music at the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Unidentified Speaker 54:25

So it wasn't just about the big artists of the big names that we wanted to get at the community level. We wanted to get the local level. All of this is about storytelling, and how music has functioned in the African American experience.

Will Robin 54:41

See you then!

[Music] 54:43