Dion McKenzie aka TYGAPAW

Do You Remember When We Just Lived?

I started on guitar rather than keyboard because it made sense to me as a way to approach music theory. Maybe because of my dyslexia, I learned in patterns, always grouping things; I would never latch on to the letters or numbers. The visual layout of the fretboard made sense. It was a good place to start. I enjoyed playing guitar.

I was in bands. I think there's still a Myspace page for one song. The music is horrible, but you've got to start somewhere. Testing out the waters of my songwriting abilities. Even though we might be the harshest about the beginning stages of development of our own craft, at the time I was really excited that I recorded a song and I put it online. I shared it with Jesse Boykins. Jesse's sweet and always gave me words of encouragement. From there, I had another band. And it was like we were making worlds. Felt like I unlocked my purpose in those early years.

During that journey, I was undocumented. Music saved me. Being in bands saved my life. I cannot express how difficult it is to live in America without proper working papers, and without being able to get a job. I worked in Caribbean bars. The pay was forty dollars for a shift from 6 p.m. to 3 a.m. And then you work for tips. They'll take advantage if they can, even your own people. When I defaulted into that, that was one of the greatest challenges in my life.

Right before that, I graduated from Parsons School of Design. I couldn't get the graphic design jobs for which I was qualified because of my status at the time. I didn't quite have an understanding of how bad it would be when my student visa ended. In my naiveté, I was confident in my abilities. I really did everything I could to get the H1 visa. I would be on a job and ask them to sponsor me and they'd say they wouldn't be able to at this time, or that they already sponsored someone else.

If I'd gone home to Jamaica, at that time, there just weren't any opportunities. I was twenty-one, still a baby. And straight, mentally, in the sense of conformity. I made a very hard decision to stay. But at least I was in New York City, a place where I could express myself. I was starting to take steps—playing in bands and enjoying all that freedom. I was living day by day, taking the punches as they came, figuring out where to go from there.

I had met queer people when I was a student at Parsons. But when measuring queerness, you have to factor in the intersections of Blackness. A lot of the queerness I saw was through a white lens. When I met gay Black men, things started to open up for me. When I met my dear friend André Singleton, he *saw* me. He saw me before I saw myself.

Just by talking to me, he helped me, because otherwise I wasn't comfortable speaking about my sexuality. He would invite me to house parties, little gatherings, kikis. They were doing little runway walks. Ballroom practice. I didn't

Still from the music video for “W8WTF” by Zebra Katz x Boyfriend.

know what it was, at the time. He told me to watch *Paris Is Burning*. I know that film has its issues, but it was still an introduction for people like me that were outside of the culture.

André introduced me to the writings of bell hooks, which changed my course. All about love. It started my process of rethinking the Black family under colonialism, within the framework of Blackness, of existing and overcoming and reclaiming, and loving yourself. The revolutionary practice of self-love.

I was trying to unlearn what had happened in my life back in Jamaica. I was trying to unlearn self-hate. I even looked back at my old journals. I had certain crushes back then, but I could only write them down in code. I’d just give a little compliment. I was so fearful, but the community I was invited into encouraged me not to worry about that. This was new to me, to not have to worry about expressing myself. And then the other books I was introduced to—by Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Alice Walker—those are the books that helped me open up and see myself.

I was reading American books. I felt like I had to learn about America now that it’s the country I live in. In Jamaica, I grew up thinking that Black people didn’t write books because I was only exposed to white writers. The literature I was asked to read in high school were books like *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Scarlet Letter*. But I had the desire to read the books about us. I found books about us in America.

My education really started in this moment in the US. I had received a colonized education in Jamaica, where I felt that teachers picked on the students who were not the strongest and called them out, like a hazing. It was done to me over and over. One time, one of my high school teachers called me out for talking during a lesson, but in doing so called me one of the dumbest kids in the class. From moments like this one, I have trauma about learning. I felt that colonized academia was violent.

The beautiful thing is that throughout my life I've had people who believed in me. Otherwise, I would not have gotten to where I am. No matter whether you want to see it, the universe conspires to help us along our journey, to soften the blows whenever they come.

I always had my art. I began to draw when I was five. I didn’t paint before now though. I started painting during the pandemic. It’s unlike music for me in that I don’t even have to think. Music is a different beast. I have to really apply myself because of how technical music production is. People try to glamorize music-making, but it’s hard work. We musicians have natural instincts, sure, but to apply them is a craft that takes constant work, practice, and we are always learning.

I have a strong desire to play in a band again. Some day. The songs I wrote for my next album, coming out next year, will be really fun to perform live. I'll be able to play guitar on them. I'm not too bad. It's like muscle memory once you have the foundation.

I learned to produce through working with bands, which informed how I wanted to build musical worlds. Some won't remember, but production software from the late '90s and early 2000s was intimidating. I learned ProTools while at Parsons in a sound production class, and I never wanted to touch it again.

Around 2006 a friend showed me Ableton, but being broke, I lived hand to mouth, and it was difficult to make work. It was becoming difficult to subsist. One thing I promised myself was to remain housed at all costs. Everything I earned from my shitty bar job I put towards rent, which was about six hundred a month. I often got by on one meal a day. My mode of transport was my bike. I couldn't afford the subway. I was navigating a system that was working against me. But with the belief I had for life, I just thought I would figure things out eventually.

When I got my Greencard, I was trying to get back into my field, into graphic design, but firms wouldn't hire me as I had this gap in my resume from when I was undocumented. It just broke my heart. It was like I was being penalized for something that worked against me. There are always these things in life, these rules, like if you can't account for discontinuous labor.

I love to dance in vibrant spaces. That's why I'm drawn to nightlife. I thought it possible to move into DJing only because my bandmate Erica was spinning. I really respect DJing as an artform. First of all, it's a technical skill. It implements musical theory. You have to learn rhythm. People think it's intuitive, but it's not. I come across a lot of people who can't land on the first beat. At first, I still wasn't quite sure if I could follow that interest because it was so male dominated. I was around all these male DJs. Music studios were similar. I'm just gagged that it took until the twenty-first century to have these conversations. Women have always been here, always, but without getting recognized or getting paid adequately.

Just seeing Erica was encouraging. It looked fun. I respected the craft of it. I'm interested in learning. Sometimes if I see the craft of something I'm interested in learning it, but if I don't see the diversity of its makeup maybe I'm not so interested. But with DJing I ultimately was. It suits me, maybe. I'd trained my ear for a long time, but I didn't have the money to get started on turntables. Even with CDJs, its expensive. I got started with a cheap Numark Serato DJ controller. I could have done that in my bedroom forever. It just felt liberating.

To start, I was playing whatever was popular at the time, which wasn't anything good. I was trying to build the party I'd started, called Fake Accent. That was my start at building a space for queer, trans, nonbinary Black and brown people. From there I found my way to ballroom, Jersey club, Bmore club, etc.

Let me backtrack a little here: I found ballroom first. That was through André Singleton and some others. When I heard "Ima Read" by Zebra Katz, I was like: What is this? I'd listened to a lot of music. I don't restrict myself to genres when it comes to learning. But this was a genre I'd never heard before. It leapt out at me. I'd never had such a visceral response to a track.

It has two musical elements: the voice and a sub kick. And I thought: How are you making a song? From what we learn in Western music, that's not a song at all. Is ballroom the music of my ancestors? It is music outside the framework of Western influence. I wanted to hear more of that. It was not something you could get from the radio. How do I get access to that?

My friends told me to come with them to a ball. Going to certain kiki spaces. I went to Eric Johnson's house whenever I had the privilege of being invited. Just this realization that there is this whole entire world. That we must never stop seeking those worlds. Never be complacent with what one is fed. That there's always more. That is my realization in life. I've been able to find myself in this position in life because of my curiosity to find truth.

Ballroom is a truth that I found. A community that helped affirm me. That being Black is an incredible. Ballroom is a response to being on the fringes of society. It's a response that says "no, I'm here, I'm human, I exist, and I have my brothers and my sisters, and we will celebrate us." The only other place I saw that was in dancehall sessions in Jamaica. In dancehall, when you are at a session, it's just good energy. The place where I grew up, at the parties and sessions that I would go to, everything was very community centered.

There was one street dance I went to, in a town close to Mandeville where I grew up, in a more rural area. The sound system was set up on the street and the whole community came. Somebody starts cooking food. To me ballroom is connected with those experiences. It made me so happy to find ballroom in New York. It really connected the dots for me. I was so interested in the sounds. I met Mike Q, Byrell The Great, LSDXOXO, and others who were influenced by ballroom.

I had very limited understanding of Black queer culture until I saw *Paris Is Burning* and started learning about Pepper LaBeija, and then later on, Marsha P. Johnson and other activists. It was a lot. It was a long journey just to get to feeling empowered. That's what I struggled with. I

Voguing ball, 2018. License: CC BY-SA 4.0.

struggled with feeling like I didn't have a voice. Feeling that I was invisible, because of colonized conditioning. Invisible in the sense of not even existing. It wasn't until I found community that I felt like I could exist, that I was worthy of life.

I love and respect ballroom but still feel outside of it. So, I had to create another space that centered Black queer, trans, and nonbinary Caribbeans. I didn't know what I was getting myself into. I'm interested in bringing people together. It's not a capitalist pursuit. But now I'm having to learn about capitalism. Capitalism isn't quite practiced in the Caribbean. It's too small. We grow our own produce. We live off our land. We have means to survive outside consumerism.

I had to find a venue first and build from there. The challenge of finding a venue was just riddled with misogynoir. I knew men who could easily get a night. I kept pushing and the place that opened up for me was Branded Saloon. Gerard Butler gave me the opportunity. Every Friday I would play, and it just started to build up. I was using Instagram to promote the night, to attract queer Caribbeans. I had straight Jamaican friends, from a former life who came to support it. And then new people. I would see the queer and trans people come through. It was actually building! It ran at Branded for two years, then I moved it to Friends and Lovers to get a bigger space. Then I got a residency at Trans Pecos.

Papi Juice were doing amazing work. iBomba was also an amazing party. I created Fake Accent to specifically center Black queer, trans, and nonbinary people. I was the only one who looked like me, running parties at that time. I was the only queer Black AFAB person for a while who was creating these spaces. Whenever I'm asked how I did it, I say I just never allowed the rejection to keep me down. I always tried to find a way to make things happen. To grow.

I want to see more people like me in my life. We deserve space. That spark really started to catch in the most beautiful way. I had a little stint at Red Bull Music Academy working on one of the festivals and curated one of the events. For the event I curated, I invited Papi Juice, Juliana Huxtable, many Brooklyn qtpoc collectives for the lineup.

They gave me a meager budget to work with. They had no faith. They thought the tickets wouldn't sell. It sold out. Red Bull took that model and have used it since—because it worked. This has been a challenge. How to communicate about Black queer, trans, and nonbinary spaces? How do we navigate capitalism and what it extracts from us? Because what they do is extraction, not support. I must keep blocking the extraction to protect myself. That's why the build in my life is gradual, unlike those who've just catapulted. There's always compromises, but I see how dangerous that can get. Where are we now? With all of that fighting that we did.

There's inclusion now, to a certain extent, in theory, but I'm trying to come to terms with the club no longer being that revolutionary space that we wanted it to be. It's still not nothing.

The club helped create someone like me. The club helped create someone like Juliana Huxtable. It's a school. We taught each other. Like a science experiment. It works because there could be that one night when we really got to live. Every single bit of those little times that we had we can recall like "oh girl remember when we just lived?" That's where I do believe the revolution is still there.

This is controversial, but I'm a little critical of the hedonistic aspects, the escapism. They can be beautiful and elevating, but it can also be disruptive. A lot of people don't last in it. Now that I'm ten years in, I'm saying to myself that some aspects are not sustainable. I've had to make adjustments on my rider not to include alcohol, but rather natural, healthy foods.

Now I'm shifting into: How can I advocate for care? How can I advocate for taking care of our bodies? Because I know what we all want. I know we all want to be free. And I know why my previous album, *Get Free* (2020), was successful. It's not because it's a techno album. It's because of what I was expressing within the genre of techno. And that's my whole universe, my whole life's work. My whole journey. That's what I've decided to do with my life, to share in acts of liberation. That everyone has the power, but that collectively, we can *all* have the power.

The dismantling of patriarchal views in music is something I'm deeply interested in doing. I'm interested in techno, but from the standpoint of its history, with what I discovered from my own research and curiosity. I call my music techno, because it is TECHNO. I like ballroom because it has the energy and attitude of techno. I'm not as deeply drawn to house music, as it is sweeter. I'll implement certain elements of house, but I'm drawn to techno for its ferocity, its aggression.

Music making is art, but its devalued. Could you imagine a world without hearing music? The brain and body need it. I'm deeply drawn to the mysticism of music. But with every single step of research, what am I seeing? Who gets to make the music? It makes me sad that there are systematic things in place to block someone who's assigned a certain gender. Who might have all of the tools and the curiosity, but they're not encouraged, not supported. For me, when it came to being a producer, only a few people have supported me. What is this thing where people don't see if for you? What is that projection?

I'm trying to figure out: What is gender? How does that work here? Its why, besides Blackness, I also like to focus on gender because when it comes to a creative form like music, gender has a lot to do with who gets to make it. Cisgendered men are not discouraged by default. Particularly to produce, you need encouragement. When you start in a field of study, you have your teacher, and they're supposed to help you build confidence. There's a lot of technical aspects to producing and it helps significantly when those skills are passed down. Those skills from what I've observed are mostly passed from "bro to bro."

Most of what I've learned about production I taught myself. It was hard. At the time, with Ableton you got a handful of YouTube videos maybe. They didn't tell me the advanced things. If your homies aren't there to teach you then you could take a class, but I didn't have the means. I just had to figure it out. I was not good in the beginning. Making stuff, throwing it into Ableton. Man, I can listen to some of my early stuff and my highs are so hot, taking out all of the mids so it's just really crunchy. It was raw. Not sure if I like any of my early stuff cause I can hear all my inexperience.

But what I learned down the line is that in music-making there are no rules. Sound is a really tough thing to control. Certain frequencies don't work well together on the same bandwidth. I know my shit but I'm no sound engineer. You have to really study that. I have the creative, I have the musical ideas, but in order to make my music I had to learn everything. I engineered a lot of my early work. I'm glad I did it, because it got me to where I am and gave me confidence. With each release I got a little better. I'd learn a little bit more about how to balance my sound.

My album *Get Free* came from a place of absolute urgency. I was fed up. I'd already made *Ode to Black Trans Lives* (2020) featuring D-L Stewart. That was my soft coming out. I have a voice and I wanted to use it, even if it's not me on the mic.

Actually, I wasn't going to make *Get Free*. I had plans for a more experimental album. But then I was researching Underground Resistance and the Bellevue Three, the whole story of the origins of techno. And I thought this is fucking amazing. When you're queer, an immigrant, Black, a lot about the genre of techno as it is today was saying no to me. I wasn't interested in the colonized version.

I just wanted to learn the way home. I had always heard this Eurocentric version, lacking a certain soul or a certain life, monotonous. I get that the genre is about repetition. I get the abstractness of that approach. We're all trying to play adjacent techniques. We're all playing club music that's a four-four beat around 140 BPM. You can find a techno track and mix it in, maybe with a different syncopation. Or that extra kick between the three and the four, like ballroom usually does. Or finding Baltimore or Jersey tracks, the more subby-low end sounds. But then I thought: what do all these families have in common? They're all subgenres of one another. I wanted to go deeper. Deconstruct it. Trace it back.

Then I found the *New Dance Show* (1988-–94), heard the music that was being played back then, saw Black people dancing to it. What is going on!? This is exactly what I'm trying to get at. There's no clear path to finding this. It takes a lot of finding your own way. I'm drawn to techno because of its intensity. I'm drawn to a lot of music that has intensity. I'm drawn to jazz, I'm drawn to nu metal. If there's a heaviness, that's my tea.

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I was apprehensive with techno because of how it is presented. *New Dance Show* opened the door for me. Black techno in Detroit had such a natural, organic development. Pioneering a genre. New genres often come from a place of oppression. Fighting it by rising above it. It reminded me of reggae starting in Jamaica. How Lee Scratch Perry started messing around to create dub. And then how dancehall, as a subgenre of reggae, started as a counterculture when reggae became too commercial, too coopted.

The same fucking thing happened with techno. Club music is a derivative of techno. Club music lives within Black and queer spaces, but we get separated from our ancestral genres, that we're naturally drawn to, but erased from. I found it suspicious not to have the Black people who made the music on the cover of their techno records. I had questions. Was it intentional erasure? If there's no cover art, you assume the music is faceless. Then anyone can latch on and treat it like their own thing. It's very important for me that I'm on every single cover of my releases. Björk did it. We don't have the space; we don't have the luxury to be invisible. It's a practice of aligning image and sound. Aligning your legacy.

We have these limitations around genre where people in my West Indian community say things like "techno is white." You'd become something of an outcast for being into it. I was listening to all this dance music growing up, like Crystal Waters. But then later on I was told that I'm not supposed to like techno? That you're white if you listen to that. But I'm just a person whose curiosity won't accept what it's given. I need to investigate, especially when I really love something. Its really that moment, with techno, of reclaiming our history. I have as much right as anyone else to make techno, and for my music to be labeled as I want it to be labeled.

Like with rock and roll: there was Little Richard, a Black, queer artist, right at the start. But with techno it's getting to the point where I can't even engage with the discourse on Twitter about the origins of techno. There's so many forms of institutionalized racism in music. The prime example is payment. I want to talk about these things to help the children. Even if I'm one of the ones shifting from the underground to a wider audience, my pay is still lagging. They always say you have to break the market first, but in Berlin where I've played for several years, venues that didn't book me before, that are booking me now will say, "Oh but you haven't played *this* club." Well I haven't played your clubs cause, GATEKEEPING. If you watch the biopics about James Brown or Ray Charles—it was the same thing. How can we change these practices?

You can't pay rent with visibility. And there are other issues still happening now that make me wonder how anyone think it's ethical, like an exclusivity clause within your own city for example. I don't knock artists who are taking it because these clubs have the power. But of course, then we could talk about the deep institutionalized racism expressed through how DJ bookings are done.

The only club owner who's been supportive of me this year is John Barclay of Paragon and Bossa Nova Civic Club. He doesn't put clauses on me. He doesn't tell me how to promote the night. He supports the artists within the community.

It's hard to talk about some of these things without getting real about some of the violence around nightlife. Sometimes I feel like giving up. It really has not been a cute situation. But I believe in the power of music. But it's in a place right now where its very mixed. The coming together in the clubs as a revolutionary act—they found a way to commodify and extract it. And remove us from it.

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Dion McKenzie, known as **TYGAPAW**, is a producer, DJ, and artist, originally from Mandeville, Jamaica, and based in Brooklyn, New York. A polymathic artist injecting their Jamaican heritage into techno, TYGAPAW operates at the intersections of their musical and cultural roots. Released via influential Mexico City imprint N.A.A.F.I., debut album *GET FREE* is an eleven-track collection of hard-hitting, cathartic energy exploring Black joy, the active dismantling of imagined limitations, and the eradication of self-doubt using techno landscapes. Live highlights include MoMA PS1, The Hydra (London), Boiler Room (Toronto, LA), RBMA Weekender (Montreal, LA), AFROPUNK, Toronto Pride, Moonshine (Montreal), and Institute of Contemporary Art (Boston, Miami), alongside NYC institutions Webster Hall, Knockdown Center, Brooklyn Museum, Bossa Nova Civic Club, Elsewhere, Nowadays and more. TYGAPAW has also embarked on tours in Asia, Australia, and Europe, playing shows in London, Paris, Basel, Vienna, Berlin, Oslo, Seoul, Shanghai, Melbourne, Chippendale, and Leipzig. TYGAPAW's second album is scheduled for release in spring 2023.