

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

The Brief: Tyehimba Jess

Jenn Habel: This week I called Tyehimba Jess at his home in Brooklyn. We talked about music, mottos, gardening, and failure.

Tyehimba Jess: You have to be willing to fail in order to put the thing on the page that needs to be there.

JH: Jess is the author of *Olio*, which won the Pulitzer Prize, and *leadbelly*, which was a winner of the National Poetry Series. When we spoke, he was in the middle of a virtual residency at the University of Cincinnati, where he was serving as the 2021 Elliston Poet-in-Residence.

This is The Brief. I'm Jenn Habel.

TJ: Hello?

JH: Hi, did that work?

TJ: Yes.

JH: Yeah. Okay good, sorry. [sighs] Technology, is always—Well, I just wanted to tell you before we got started that I've heard from so many people this morning about your lecture and how much they liked it.

TJ: Wow, that's great. I'm glad to hear that because I don't do the lecture thing. I don't consider it my forte. It was good to ruminate on the subject.

JH: Well, it was definitely well-received. How has your morning been so far?

TJ: It's been pretty good. Been pretty smooth. You know, just taking care of business here and there and everywhere.

JH: Yeah, yeah. Well, since music is so important to your writing, one of the things I wanted to ask you about was when you listen to music. What part of your day music occupies.

TJ: That's a good question. It depends. If I'm working out, I have a whole different hip-hop kind of soundtrack that I try and get with because, you know, it's all about that rhythm. But if I'm just relaxing, if I'm just trying to kind of set a tone in my living space, you know, usually some jazz or some blues, or some R&B. I'm really, really fond of the

blues. I understand it as a kind of a pulse, as a kind of a heartbeat of the American experience, and the African-American experience in particular. I understand it as a kind of root work that goes back into an ancestral understanding of myself. I understand it as a place where the note bends instead of breaks in order to survive. And I understand it as no good and all good, at the same time. [laughter]

TJ: If you were to ask what I think would be the tonic of my musical experience, it would definitely be the blues. And jazz as well is a kind of freedom, but combined with a kind of extreme rigor that jazz musicians have. Those are the musical experiences that I primarily draw from.

JH: Before the pandemic, did you go to listen to live music frequently?

TJ: Just before the pandemic kind of hit, who did I see, I saw Jason Moran at the Village Vanguard. And that was fantastic, seeing him hit the piano with his band and he brings a lot of history into his performances. So Jason Moran, I saw him not too long ago. And then I always forget her name for some reason, but I saw this amazing singer also at the Village Vanguard. It was kind of a drag because I felt like I was just starting to really be able to get out and really explore New York's jazz scene in the way that I really wanted to. So after that's what I plan on doing more of when this pandemic lifts.

JH: Yeah. Yeah.

TJ: Cécile McLorin Salvant.

JH: Oh, that's who it was?

TJ: Who is an amazing singer. I think, actually, I got to give her a copy of *Olio* and took a picture with her. It was fantastic.

JH: Are there any times when you don't want to listen to music? Like any times in your life or times in your day, or is it just you would listen to music whenever you could?

TJ: You know, I don't listen to music when I write because I'm trying to hear the music of the poem. I'm trying to hear the rhythm of the poem. It's like I listened to it around the time that I'm writing. I generally need some silence when I'm writing.

JH: That's how I am, too. I'm always amazed when I hear that people listen to music when they write.

TJ: I used to do that. I think that's good for like if you want just get something out, etcetera, that's kind of a good thing. But I think at a certain point, I started to realize that I had a music that I was trying to listen to in the poem that was informed by the

music that I was listening to. But in order to hear it, I had to turn that music off, you know what I'm saying? It's like trying to listen to two conversations at once.

JH: Yeah. Which some people seem to be able to do—it's like their brains can split in different places but not me. All right, I'm cribbing a question from *The New York Times*. A while ago, they asked 75 artists about trying to be creative during the pandemic. One of the things they asked was, did you make anything that mattered during this year? One thing I liked was some of the writers, instead of listing writing, said things like a compost heap, food, or peace with myself, or something.

TJ: I became a much better cook. [laughs] I became a much better cook. I made bread—which is crazy. I made great cheese jalapeno bread. And I grew a garden on the roof. I live in an apartment, which is over a restaurant. I can walk out onto the roof through the back window of this apartment. I just grew a garden, grew some tomatoes, snap peas, pole beans, some lettuce.

JH: That's nice. Yeah, I kept buying plants and vegetables. I kept putting more and more pots in my yard. It got like kind of crazy. [laughs] But when I had to pack it all up in the fall, I realized I'd been acting a little bit nutty just planting and planting and planting. But it definitely helped me get through this period, for sure.

TJ: Yeah.

JH: You made some good stuff. (Laughter) And maybe did some writing, too, but you don't have to tell me about that if you don't want to.

TJ: (Laughs)

JH: The other day I came upon something that August Wilson said in an interview. He said that he uses quotes to keep him focused or inspired when he's working on a project, so like usually two or three at a time. So at the time of the interview I read, he mentioned three. A quote by Frank Gehry while he was working on an addition for the Corcoran Gallery, which was "I hope to take it to the moon." A quote attributed to Charlie Parker, "Don't be afraid, just play the music." And a quote from Bhagavad Gita, "You have the right to the work but not the reward." So I was wondering, do you ever have any sentences that operate for you that way? Like a talisman of some sort for you.

TJ: I do have one thing that I printed it out and I framed it. It's "Head down, hopes up." That's really simple. But head down, hopes up. Also, remember how many times you've fallen. Remember how many times you've gotten up. I guess that's a little kind of revelation that I had for myself. Something I felt worthy of framing and remind myself to keep in contact with the work and don't look up until it's done. Don't be distracted by the party favors, and the glitz, and this and that and the other, because when you start pursuing those things is when you start to cross yourself up.

And also remembering how many times you've fallen. There's a lot of ways to fall. There's a lot of other ways to get up, too. And that's what writing is, it's a lot of failure. It's a lot of failure, and you have to be willing to fail in order to get to put the thing on the page that needs to be there.

JH: Yeah, and sometimes it seems like you have to be aiming for something that you don't even think you can attain to keep innovating. And so it's like you're almost just set up to fail, like you have to fail. Kind of.

TJ: Yeah.

JH: In order to succeed. That head down, hope up—that makes sense to me thinking about you working on *Olio* because that book, it strikes me as this radical act of patience to have written that book. I mean, I know every book of poems probably is like a radical act of patience. But that book in particular, I just think about the work that went into it and the patience to keep moving on with it and letting it grow. Did it turn out to be a longer and larger book than you thought it would be?

TJ: Definitely longer. I did not strike out to write a 235-page book, or however many pages are in it. I did not intend to do that, but that's just the way it worked out. I got a lot of lucky breaks. I have a publisher that is maybe the only publisher in the world, in the country at least, that would dedicate the time and energy and know-how to create a book that is like *Olio* with 4 fold-out pages that tear out of the book, eight and a half by eleven more or less, 230 pages and illustrations. That's kind of crazy.

JH: [laughs] I know, yeah. Yeah. Was it like you came to them and said, "I want to do this. Can you do it?"

TJ: Yeah. I had roughly about half of it done. And I sent it to him in a box with all the shapes already formed, like cylinders and toruses and Möbius strips. You open the lid, and taped to the lid was the McCoy twins. So it was like an experience, and then the rest of the manuscript was tied down in there. So it was an experience in creating the introduction for them to the book. They're a very interesting press. They're bibliophiles. They have a lot of care. Their books are beautiful, so they were down for it. It worked out for everybody.

JH: Yes, for sure. Well, I don't want to keep taking up so much of your time, but would you mind reading a poem before we hang up? It could be one of yours or a poem by anybody.

TJ: I got my friend Langston here. I've always dug Mr. Hughes. Here's his "Note on Commercial Theater."

[reads poem]

You've taken my blues and gone —
You sing 'em on Broadway
And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,
And you mixed 'em up with symphonies
And you fixed 'em
So they don't sound like me.
Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.

You also took my spirituals and gone.
You put me in Macbeth and Carmen Jones
And all kinds of Swing Mikados
And in everything but what's about me —
But someday somebody'll
Stand up and talk about me,
And write about me —
Black and beautiful —
And sing about me,
And put on plays about me!
I reckon it'll be
Me myself!

Yes, it'll be me.

JH: Thank you. That was awesome. Thanks for your time and your thoughts. I appreciate it.

TJ: Absolutely. Absolutely. Thanks. Thanks for your energy.

JH: Back at you. Okay. Bye.

TJ: Have a good one. Bye.

JH: You too.

JH: The Brief is affiliated with the Elliston Poetry Room and the Department of English at the University of Cincinnati. It's produced by Michael C. Peterson. You can find the whole season at soundcloud.com/ellistonpoetryroom. Thanks for listening.