

more of an avalanche: Elijah transcript

John Bloomfield 00:00

Elijah is an electronic electronic music producer and co founder of the influential grime label Butterz, which has been described by The Guardian as one of the genres smartest operations. He and the core artists Flava D Swindle and Royal-T. On the label he runs with his partner Skilliam have taught globally and have been a fixture across the club and festival circuit since 2010. He held a residency at London's Fabric from 2013 to 2016 and broadcasted weekly on the then pirate now community station Rinse from 2008 to 2014. This has seen him collaborate with all of the top tier artists in grime such as Skepta, JME, Wiley, Kano, and Stormzy. His work spans music, programming, journalism, a&r and artist management, and shines a light on the artistic social and economic challenges and opportunities for emerging artists. His podcasts series Rhythm & Cash explore these issues head on with MCs, producers, and journalists talking openly about how they make a living. And so as associate artistic director at Lighthouse in Brighton, Elijah producers last dance, a series of talks, performances and online publications that take the debate on the road and into clubs and galleries and cities across the UK for a timely and urgent look at the rapidly changing landscape for artists and creative communities.

Elijah 01:25

Can I use this one?

John Bloomfield 01:28

Oh yeah, of course.

Elijah 01:29

I'll just feel like an MC if I do it that way, just to make me feel more comfortable. I'm not comfortable talking sitting down weirdly enough. I don't have a script or anything. I just have like kind of images, and then like of my thoughts around it. So my background is in like music production and DJing. I spend a lot of time in clubs with like grime and garage and a lot of like London sounds. And I've got to like travel around the world to play in the music with people. Throughout that I've kind of just had this blog on the side, just writing about different experiences I've had with artists. And someone kind of picked up on one of the topics that I was writing about just like artists' sustainability. Basically, it's not like a topic in the music that I put out or in the work in general or something that really comes up that much in grime in general, by something that is affecting, like all of us day to day, and something I'll talk about on Twitter all the time. And he invited me to Lighthouse in 2015. I kind of did a talk about how like I make money, which is like kind of like ugly topic in like arts organizations sometimes. And then I did it. And then it was one of those things where someone said, Yeah, let's talk again. And I was like, Yeah, cool. And I just left and never thought about it. And then this fun from the Arts Council, which I didn't really know it was at a time came up called Change Makers and it was like looking at...we'll get to that in a minute. Looking at a fund to support a cohort of black minority ethnic and disabled leaders to develop their leadership skills for an undertaking of a senior leadership, training and development placement hosted by a national portfolio organisation, or major partner museums. So at that time, when I saw those four sentences, I don't really know what that meant. Even though I've been involved in like the arts in a broad sense for like, eight, nine years, since I left University, I've never had a job or anything. I've always done music. But the program was about giving us relevant experiences, skills, knowledge and confidence to be able to compete on merit

when future artistic directors chief executive, or other senior leadership positions became available. So I thought okay, like that's something maybe I could do. And then I got told this only 10% of NPO managers are from BAME background again, an expression I hadn't really heard before my work because most of the people that do the kind of stuff that I do, like either look like me or you know brown or like just not in this...what's what's the A for again? And! Damn! It's black and minority ethnic background. As a black...Asian..?

Audience Member 1 01:43

It's shifted.

Elijah 02:06

It's shifted? Is it...Oh my god. Yeah, so I was like, confronted with all this like language that I wish I had your actual spread that whole time. You need to actually get that to every arts organization ASAP. Like have it on the wall. Because when I was looking at all that I was like, I've digested all this stuff in the last 12 months that I wasn't really thinking about just creating work. So if I saw that at the beginning, I would have been like okay, I've been able to navigate a lot better and quicker than I then actually did. So I was thinking, Okay, could I be like an artistic director of the future? I don't know. So this was that this is the kind of view that of the world I had during my work. So I'm usually in the DJ position. This is Skepta and this is fabric, and at the time when this bid was going through fabric closed, there was like a death in the club. An 18 year old overdosed and passed away. And the police said, they're closing that space. And I thought, what happens if these kind of spaces that have been working in, meeting people, creating work keep closing? What can I do about it? Obviously, I'm not like a millionaire or

anything, so I can't open my own space, and I probably will never be able to. And it made me think like, my generation of artists, if we can never own space, especially, I mean, I'm from London, like, if we can never own our own buildings, like how can we control our art? Or be in charge of organizations? Like, we'll have to, like lead like ones that already exist? Or? I don't know, create small ones on WhatsApp, or wherever people are doing these days? I don't know. So how I kind of did it my work to challenge of stepping into this organization Lighthouse, which is based in Brighton. So I've jumped into another kind of city. I've never worked in office or never worked in an organization before, so I had to kind of adjust really quickly to that way of thinking working in like 10 to 6 and then stopping because people have like families and stuff. I just like never stop. Yeah, this has been good. This has been like a insight like, okay, it's actually good to actually have a Yeah, like 8 hour day that has been super weird. And like, even the fact like someone wants me to be creative, or like half 10. Okay, that's new. And I, most of that time my face has been like this, like I've been, I was kind of thrust into this position of being like, yes, like, a black artistic director. And the work isn't specifically about race or about. I don't know, about, yeah, about race and about being black and like, Black Power, specifically. But I had like support from a lot of black elders that are like, you're in this position, like, we're gonna amplify you back you, you're like, yes, sick, like, I'm just, I just, I just happened to be black as well, I am black, definitely. But not all the work has to do with that I had all this kind of crazy support, but at the same time it made me like, not kind of want to engage on certain levels, because I'm like, I care about a lot of like youth, and that working class politics, all this kind of stuff, which sometimes when, like, I'm like, this doesn't come across and I'll move on. At the same time, I've been still DJing. So I've been seeing kind of, you know, culture change in front of me every, every week I've been playing. I think I did 60 shows last year, on top of like, being in this kind

of office kind of environment. And I would tell people in office, like, Oh, these are the things that happened when I was like away on the weekend, and trying to like, incorporate what I was learning in music back into the arts and vice versa. That as a cool picture as well, which is worth pointing out. So the topic, last dance when I actually got to the organization, the person that brought me in and was like, so supportive of like me as a person left straightaway. So that was a bit of a hard thing to adjust to. And then the director of the organization left a few months later, so I was like, Oh I kind of I feel like I'm in touch with myself now. I got like a great new director called Alli and we kind of built up this program. And instead of like just trying to attack all these people that are kind of like taking our spaces and kind of affecting how new movements get outside, I was like, let's just start here at lighthouse. Our riches isn't in money is in space, that most of the time we have like a room empty, like let in letting people come in like you are doing residences here for like a month or something. We do residences for a day or two days. And that's enough sometimes to get collectives there that can advance ideas really quickly. You know that will take two three days like when I was coming up when I started my label, me and my partner Skilliam we just used to work in like my bedroom, and that's not really like a possibility for everyone. So I brought it in other artists that I've been kind of working with on tour and did kind of creative workshops like this. This is Flava D like one of the artists that's on our label and kind of kind of opened up, like, the kind of format I usually have is them not having their laptop and then have them create work in front of people. And then as they go, let people ask questions. So that's been kind of like a cool way of demystifying a lot of things that I've been kind of kept secret about, you know, club music and the way we kind of form work. This is like, kind of the audience generally is quite young, and an audience that that that organization didn't think that he could reach the, the language I got when I came in was like, oh,

young people are out at home on Xbox or Netflix or are like, apathetic, they don't care art or they don't care about coming out. And I'm like, nah they're here like, you have to, like, believe me that the people want to come out, if you put something on that interests them. And they do. Like, every time we do stuff like this, like a room kind of decides they're going to get like 60 people and they're always busy. And they've made program around knowing that they have this audience now. So maybe like, 200/300 people that kind of on rotation come that's completely changed their like, audience or what it was before. This was like a workshop we did, like an all female production workshop. So we had people come in and every one of these have Ableton Live, making their first beat at Lighthouse basically. And instead of like, yeah, complaining about all these kind of, like politics and clubs, I'm like, if I if we arm everyone with the tools to just make their own networks and clubs and music ultimately and control and own their own work, like that's going to influence the scene more than I don't know, talking. I don't know when I've been in kind of arts settings and a lot of diversity conversations, we talk so much but we kind of like we never get to like a resolution. In this situation I felt like if I could make like, say 10 new producers and people that kind of think similarly you don't even know each other exists in this kind of small place called Brighton. This could be the future of clubbing. I've made films with friends over time and this is just a couple shots of what I've been making. So this is at a new place called Five Miles in Seven Sisters. You can't really so that, can you see that? Let me try and increase the brightness, it doesn't make any new. Describe it. Okay. So this is at a party called Opulence. A queer party, you know, okay, yeah. How do I describe it? They describe themselves as like a queer techno party in London, like, kind of like dress to impress vibe. And that was last Friday. And, again, it's like, arming people with ideas. Instead of saying, Okay, these things are bad. Like, fuck it, let's just arm new people. Sorry, sorry. So I nearly nearly got to 15

minutes. So I just, I feel like my position of lack power, so to speak, has been like being able to arm new people with the tools and resources and money, most importantly, to create what they think is a like a utopian vision of clubbing rather than me deciding that from top down, or, you know, promoters and things that already exist, like trying to change them, I'm just like, let them do their thing. Let's use Lighthouse and use me and people around us to build up new talent and ideas that haven't even done before yet. This is at CERN, the Large Hadron Collider. So again, like in between that, you know, being like behind the desk, organizing things I'm kind of making work as well. And this is with an artist called Haroon Mirza. And we're doing like a kind of installation slash gig at Brighton Festival and kind of mixing some of his theory around what kind of music culture will be like in the future. But at the same time, you know, connecting it with sciences. I don't want to go into it too much otherwise, I'm gonna lose myself. *laughs* But it was like a really unique situation I wouldn't have been able to get just by I don't know mixing like grime records or making music by like connecting art, music, science sometimes might just come up with like these random situations. There's not really like a grand point behind it. So the future for me like the placement with Arts Council Change Maker thing was for 18 months, and I finish next month. So now I'm like, kind of in the middle, I'm like, what do I do? Do I continue like being a music person, or like, trying to be an art professional? I don't really know. But like, I think that the perfect sweet spot for me is like being somewhere in the middle where I can still kind of do my practice as like an artist tour meet new people, and then bring those ideas to art and bring those and then let you know, the budgets that I get access to to be used by people that have never been in this kind of setting before themselves because that was me in 2016, because I basically had no, I didn't know what the Arts Council was. So that's how

out of it I was, I mean, and that was only here literally December 2016. So I'm brand new. Yeah.