

[MUSIC PLAYING]

SARAH BALDWIN: Today's episode is an interview with the musicians Will Calhoun, Vernon Reid, and Melvin Gibbs. Calhoun and Reid were both part of the '80s rock group, Living Color, a predominantly African-American band known for their music with strong political messages. Gibbs is a renowned bassist, composer, and producer who has appeared on more than 200 albums.

Together the three of them performed as the Zig Zag Power Trio in Providence this past march. Trending Globally sent producers to interview fans at the concert, and it was clear that these musicians have a passionate following.

[DRUMMING]

VERNON REID: You all are patient. I appreciate that.

MUSICIAN: One, two, three.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

FAN 1: I'm a big fan of Living Color, and I think Vernon Reid's incredible, and it's a really cool night to see him playing with a trio.

FAN 2: I know I love living color, and so that's why I'm here.

FAN 3: Well, I just love the eclectic sounds. There's the funk, and the pop, and the rock, and I think it's pretty cool.

FAN 4: Oh, they're intellectuals. They're extremely thoughtful about what they're doing in their music, and in life more generally.

FAN 5: I just have heard that they're kind of like living legends, so I have high expectations.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

INTERVIEWER: So it's a pleasure to have all three of you here with us for the podcast. And I wanted to talk with you about the role of creative artists, musicians, during politically polarized times, like the times that we're currently living through in our country today.

WILL CALHOUN: So to me, the last real communicator is art, where poetry, and music, and paintings, and literature, and books, where we can really be honest and have an honest-- even if we don't agree on Basquiat's work or "The Rite of Spring," or Miles Davis's electric band, or Wu Tang. Whatever it is, maybe we don't agree on what's happening, but it's happening. And that's, to me, when you ask that question, it's important that it comes up.

It's never going to be really comfortable. It's not going to be enjoyment for everyone. But the process kind of has to be real. And I think art is the last real frontier for communication.

VERNON REID: I think there are a lot of artists that are feeling things that are not expressing them. They're not applying their creativity to the things that they're feeling. People are not engaging the way people have engaged in the recent past. I mean, certainly people in hip hop are-- Kendrick Lamar springs immediately to mind as someone that is taking on in a real way current polarized circumstances.

But I'm reminded of four dead in Ohio. When the Kent State shootings happened, they happened on a Thursday. And by that Monday the song "Four Dead in Ohio" was on the radio.

[MUSIC - CROSBY, STILLS, NASH & YOUNG, "FOUR DEAD IN OHIO"] This summer I hear the drummin'. Four dead in Ohio. Gotta get down to it. Soldiers are gunning us down.

And that kind of dynamism is something-- especially now when you consider that we have SoundCloud and all these other ways of getting music out there-- it's a shame that this terrible thing that went down in Florida has not been responded to musically directly. We have a lot of talented people in all these various genres, and I think that we have a cultural confrontation in social media, and shaming, and negativity that people are really avoiding, because the reaction will be swift and brutal. But we have to have courage. This is a time for courage.

MELVIN GIBBS: So how do they deal with this thing that they actually have to grapple with as a teenager when for the past year and a half all the songs have been about Molly Percocet and Xan, and now you can't even go to school. I mean, they're going to have to grapple with it. So it's going to be interesting to see what happens, because it can't get swept under the rug. I mean, at the moment, I agree with Vernon. It's kind of mind boggling anybody from down there make any statement one way or the other. They just kind of going on the way they're going. But it's impossible now. I mean, you have this thing that happened that it's almost transcended this idea of [? meme ?] culture, because the kids who were actually involved in it are never going

to forget it.

INTERVIEWER: It's the kids who've been picked up in the media, some of them, their testimony as witnesses. But back to Walter Kendrick Lamar and Ohio Crosby, Stills, Nash, & Young, are there any other exemplars that one can think of the kind of constructive, timely role for creative artists that the three of you individually think of as positive examples, and also negative examples?

WILL CALHOUN: Well, I'll jump on a South African tip, because I remember when the "Sun City" record came out. And I remember how a bunch of artists got together and put together this track with "Sun City," and many Americans and many musicians included, and many people of color were not aware really of what was going on in South Africa--

[MUSIC - ARTISTS UNITED AGAINST APARTHEID, "SUN CITY"] We're rockers and rappers united and strong. We're here to talk about South Africa. We don't like what's going on.

WILL CALHOUN: --what the state of emergency was, that cars were pulling up in front of junior high schools and just shooting kids, just for the sport of it. There was this thing about "Sun City" was this resort where Africans worked but weren't allowed to vacate. And there were artists, like Tina Turner and Chick Corea who did go there and play, and a lot of American artists said, if we're going to help stop this apartheid scenario, we're going to help put this thing into the eyes of the people, you need to be educated about what's really going on in South Africa.

So that's a track in a moment-- and, you know, Miles was on the track, and Springsteen, and it's a bunch of people who did this "Sun City" track, and rappers. So I like the fact that it didn't it wasn't just a blues record, or a jazz record. There were people from different musical communities that got together to play on this track. The track wasn't as important as the movement, in my opinion.

The track was very necessary, but I know for a fact a lot of musicians who were not aware of "Sun City," were not aware of still black and white water fountains and not being able to be places during the time when this track came out. It brought another kind of awareness to the apartheid scenario to people outside the country.

INTERVIEWER: Vernon, you and Will as part of the band Living Color, you have a fairly recent song, "Who Shot Ya?"

VERNON REID: Well, "Who Shot Ya?"-- it's interesting, because it started out really as being fans of Biggie

Smalls. And the thing about covering "Who Shot Ya?" is that we made this record, Shade, which was a certain take on how blues informs hard rock and metal. And we wanted to examine that. And "Who Shot Ya?" is not a blues song, per se. It's a hip hop song.

But "Who Shot Ya?"-- the ballad of Christopher Wallace, what happened to Tupac and [? Big, ?] is a blues narrative. It's a blues story. And that's part of the reason why we took it on.

[MUSIC - THE NOTORIOUS B.I.G., "WHO SHOT YA?"] Who shot ya? Separate the weak from the obsolete. Hard to creep them Brooklyn streets. It's on nigga-- fuck all that bickerin' beef.

We went and did a video directed by David Taylor. One of the things we did was that we started to graphically illustrate statistics, and it started to just name a bunch of-- no country has had more deaths by gun violence, including suicides and accidental discharges. No country in the world has had more celebrities or well-known musicians killed by gunfire. I mean, I'm going from Dime Bag Darrell to Eddie Jefferson.

And we decided to illustrate that, what the actual human cost is of ultimately, the question-- you know, Christopher Wallace asked that question and then became a victim himself.

INTERVIEWER: What's your take on music and the arts as a way to bridge across generations?

MELVIN GIBBS: That's something I personally have always thought was important and something that I continue to do. I have another band I'm involved with, a band called "Harriet Tubman," and we just went to a jazz festival where we did an expanded with a group called the James Brandon Lewis trio which is a bunch of guys in their 20s and early 30s. And we brought in a whole set of younger musicians.

And I think that's very important. I think it's interesting, because I'm still kind of halfway working through my next record, which is going to have a lot of hip hop on it. I rap on it. And the thing becomes you have to speak from your own life experience when you make music, right? And I'm listening to these music that's out this year, and I don't do Molly, I don't do Percocet, I've already made all of those mistakes.

So it becomes a question of what do you do? And it was very interesting, because where I landed with the record, when 444 came out, that's kind of really resonated with me, because it's a question of reaching out and giving-- all you can do is kind of just put information out there for somebody younger and they'll take it or they won't take it. But the question is, is the information useful to them. And JC really framed his life in a way that I thought was it was

really interesting.

One of the things me and my brother talk about a lot is this whole idea of the kids are the problem. No, the kids aren't. In my opinion, the kids are not the problem at all. The adults are the problem.

The kids know what they need. The adults are trying to tell them that they don't need it, or they're not qualified to speak on the subject. They're more qualified-- they were in the room. They're 100% qualified to speak on the subject. But it becomes a question of-- and it goes back to the original conversation-- how are they using their voice? So I think part of it for us is to really kind of help them to use their voice.

VERNON REID: You know, I think that one of the things that Frank Ocean did on his record *Orange*, he has a song on that record called "Super Rich Kids." And it's a brilliant, brilliant song.

[MUSIC - FRANK OCEAN, "SUPER RICH KIDS"] Too many white lies and white lines. Super rich kids with nothing but loose ends. Super rich kids with nothing but fake friends. Start my day up on the roof.

Because he talks about a certain kind of upper class black privilege that's a conversation that nobody's having. He's talking about kids that are the children of doctors and lawyers, that are super rich kids with nothing but loose ends, super rich kids with nothing but fake friends. And one of the things that I love about this song is that he says, maids come around too much, parents aren't around enough.

And just for a young artist to acknowledge the importance of parents is huge. I mean, it's so unexpected, and it was so remarkable at the time. And he's an artist that-- you know, along with talking the Kendrick Lamars and things-- he's an artist that really is carving his own path in a very interesting way. And I remembered hearing that, and it's weird, because we never expect for certain things to be acknowledged and talked about. But they are very important.

INTERVIEWER: Wanted to take things in a slightly different direction and talk about money. In particular, funding for the arts, public funding for the arts-- this is a time where there's a lot of political discussion about cutbacks to things like the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts. Now that's at the national level. If we scale it down to the local level, there's a trend of the disappearance of venues for live music, especially in second and third tier cities. We certainly see it here in Providence.

Lots of hotels are being built, but no one's going to have any place to go to hear live music. It's a lot cheaper to just pay a DJ. So when you put all of those things together, it seems to an outsider to be a difficult time to be a musician economically. I wonder what your thoughts are on the political economy, if you will, of the creative arts?

WILL CALHOUN: Well, the political economy has changed. Most definitely we have these incidences that have changed how technology has made our industry, has cheapened our income. It's made it difficult for us to survive. I'm listening to that question and there's two sides of it to me. I don't think anything is going to be created by us not looking at the reality of what we're trying to say and do. Our game has changed quite a bit, and I think if we're going to continue to be artists, and support each other, and continue to have people like the music that we're doing, or the art, or the painting, and so on, the game is changing on us.

So we have to maybe have our own venues, or go back to playing a gig in church, or in somebody's basement, or what have you. My daughter was used to being in this African gymnastics school who won the-- African-American who won the first gold medal for gymnastics. And when I went to her recital, I was sitting next to-- [INAUDIBLE] [? Hillard ?] is her name. And when I went to her first recital, I happened to be sitting next to her mother, the mother of the woman who has this program.

And I said, how did you guys get the money together to put your daughter into gymnastics? You know, you lived in the Midwest, and she said, oh, we didn't have the money. We just went around through the neighborhood. And the church gave us some, the guy who owned a paint store gave us some, and everybody in that community wanted to see her go to the Olympics.

The game is changing for us. Everyone who is going to want to see jazz, or see Zig Zag Trio, whatever the case may be, are going to have to realize that there are new stakes involved. It may not be available at a venue or a club anymore. So either we sit back and we say, damn, these things are closing, and we have to take less pay or have the DJ, or we have to create new environments for ourselves. If people love the art, they're going to support it.

But it has to be a [? new ?] position. I would like to mention that, artistically speaking. And politically, I've gone to Americans for the Arts Foundations, been invited by Robert Redford who funds a lot of those kind of things, and I've heard these speeches, and I've seen layouts of \$650 million dollars available for the arts, and how is all of that money available but there's no-- what's going on? How is that money getting set up with folks, and then it's not being

distributed?

So at the end of the day, politically and artistically, there has to be, I think, a more homegrown network of our survival and how things are going to be invested. And that includes your previous question about connecting with young people, and not necessarily having to sit the process of what we're doing. I do it myself. I go to schools. I don't have a program, I don't have an agent. I contact the school, can I come speak on this, come speak on that, and just go to the school.

Because some of the things that we complain about our generation and young folks not making connections to-- although they have YouTube and all of these things-- is that is the actual information processes, how to get the things to them. So it's not just a visit on a website and they continue to go.

And I got inspired by going into a library, to a school in the Bronx, and I saw Duke Ellington, and Michael Jackson, and Sammy Davis on the wall. And I just started by asking the student, who's that? Who's that? And the only one that they knew on that wall was Michael Jackson. And that's sad.

So that's where it began. But then I said to myself, well, who's telling them about Duke Ellington and Sammy Davis Junior? It's not the librarian. And the photographs are there, but where's the actual contact? So we also have a role into investing and putting the vibe into getting ourselves in a position that we can play. And it's not going to be the way it was. It's not going to be booking agents and clubs and lines around the block.

INTERVIEWER: Melvin, did you want to say something?

MELVIN GIBBS: Will just touched on something that is a whole other direction. I mean, the simplest level is we're dealing with capitalism. We're dealing with this new form of monopoly capitalism with the digital platforms that is such a sort of heinous turn away from the sort of model that allowed what we did to work in the 20th century. And it's not even a question of, should we go back? It's a question of just looking realistically at what this new business model means, and what we as a country actually want to do about it.

Because the reality is, I did a bunch of research on this years ago. And the reality is the goal of every digital business is to become a monopoly. That is the end game for everybody. So at best, you're going to have three companies. The goal is you'll have one.

So what does that mean? And the example I gave when I speak on this is if I'm making music in-- I don't know, let me pick someplace-- Madrid, that money's going to San Francisco or it's going to Stockholm. It's not staying in Madrid. It's not nurturing the actual scene. It's going to the people who own the platforms.

And this is kind of the overriding problem. And it's the same thing in the live business too where you just have Live Nation that's sucking up everything right now. Going back to what Will said, yes, people are going to have to affirmatively decide that they're going to do what is necessary to make sure that things are nurtured on a local level, or it's going to disappear. Those are your only two options.

VERNON REID: Well, it seems to me that we need a better class of rich people. Seriously, we do. The Robert Barons of the past actually felt some semblance of social responsibility. Andrew Carnegie, he's a bare knuckle businessman, but he built Carnegie Hall. But that's not public policy.

I mean, I think to myself, what are these hedge fund people doing with their money? We have a lot of super rich people. And here's the thing about music. Music education, learning to play a violin, or a cello, or a flute, or something is vital to your brain development. It doesn't matter if you're going to be first chair or second chair.

Just the discipline of doing it means you're going to deal with math differently. You're going to deal with literature differently. You're going to deal with other educational things differently. And everything is really sideways. We know that it's sideways. The priorities are totally off.

It's seen as something that's optional. In order to play music, at one point many Americans learned how to read music, because that was the only way music was going to be played. So this changed, of course, with the advent of recording. And all of those things, all of the technologies that even gave us the living that we have, we benefited from a certain technological revolution. But that technological revolution did not stop.

And that's part of the problem. One of the problems that we have a glut of everything. We have too much of everything. We have too many virtuosos. We have too many people who are clever. We have a lot of clever people that are trying to do the same sort of things. We have too many people that want to be the next movie, or whatever it is. Right?

And what are we teaching these kids? We're teaching kids to do what exactly? You know what

I mean? Because we have this kind of glut of everything. And it's a real issue. And as far as I can see, it's not going away.

Now, there are new medias, and there are new ways of getting your particular brand of aesthetic out there-- the podcast realm, there are new funding things. But those funding things, there are a few people that win, and there are a lot of people that-- Patreon and GoFundMe and those sorts of things-- but that's not public policy. We made our record partially with crowdfunding.

And this is also moving forward we're going to need a new kind of connections between emerging content creators.

INTERVIEWER: Sounds like we're living in very scary times. A more positive way to put it is there's a lot of grist for the creative mills. What advice, if any, or comfort, or suggestions do you have for young creatives?

VERNON REID: OK, I'm going to say, it's a kind of a cliche to even bring it up, but I have to say this-- the film *Black Panther* is a tremendous event. It really is. It's a tremendous event, because simply in terms of capitalism, and the measure by which all things are supposed to be, we've been told that films featuring African-American stars have limited appeal.

Black Panther is going into its third week as number one. It's made north of \$700 million dollars. The film is going to make more than a billion dollars. And Melvin and I attended a screening of *Black Panther*, which there was a panel discussion. And one of the things that the leader of the discussion said was that-- Warrington Hudlin, one things that he said was there is going to be a rush for content.

So people that are writing and creating things need to be ready to have their pitches. People need to be creative. And it has to be high quality, because the thing about it is as someone that is a fan of the whole genre, it's put aside that it's a film that is about a kind of African, African-American subject matter. The movie, in the context of those films, is a very important film. It's an excellent movie by any standards. And it literally raises the bar for the Marvel universe kind of films.

But there is going to be, suddenly, that reticence to take on imaginative projects that's going to go to wayside. And my only question is that is the content going to be ready and of the highest quality?

WILL CALHOUN: I can't add anything to that. I think *Black Panther* is the answer, in my opinion, to your question, the film for young people, for people of color, certainly for young ladies too that can see the power in that. But Vernon's point, I just want to say one small piece to it. His last comment is the need is going to be there, and it needs to be high. But what's the most important thing about your question is the need is going to be there, the first part of your sentence.

And the fact that that film created a need is the impetus. That's the seed. Now, getting to the higher quality is another conversation. But the fact that there is something there-- when we were all young we heard music, or we heard a record, or we went to Central Park, or we went to some club, something that made us want-- I got to pick up my instrument and practice. I got to write a song like this. I got to write a song in six, or in 12. I got to write some chord changes. I have to write a blues. I gotta learn how to swing. I gotta learn chord melody. Whatever it is that you do.

But something inspired that. And maybe our first three or four or five attempts, we came up with laughable things. But then eventually we got to something that became truth, that became for sale, that became classic, that became Grammy award winning, that became internationally known, that became style, became game changers. And I think that his answer is the answer, but the need is the most important part. The high quality part, we'll get to that. But the fact that the film created is creating this need of content and this need of creativity, to me, is enough for the race to begin.

MELVIN GIBBS: Me being me, I'm going to be contrary, because I'm that contrary guy. I would say if you're a kid coming up, and a kid means that you're still in a position where you don't have to supply your own needs, you should really take time to look at how the system actually operates, and what works about the system, and think about what you can do to hack the system.

And you should think in terms of what you do as a creative person has a lot of value. Do not buy into, OK, because I made this video, and now that is up on YouTube it's worth whatever it's worth. It's worth whatever you can convince people it's worth. They've convinced you that it's only worth zero. You have to flip this around. You don't have to believe everything adults tell you, right?

Think about how you as community groups can create value that you can use to exchange. That's all that bitcoin is [INAUDIBLE]. Bitcoin is literally nothing. It's a piece of code that is now

worth billions of dollars.

WILL CALHOUN: [INAUDIBLE] that.

MELVIN GIBBS: So think about how the system actually works. I mean, I'm not naive enough to think that the system is going to change. And I've been doing this a while, so I'm kind of invested in the system, and I kind of have to figure out how to make it work. But for the kids who don't have that issue, you should think about this whole thing a different way, in addition to listening to everything that Vernon and Will had to say about the fact that there's a whole new generation out here that's going to be looking at this thing differently, that's going to need to have their voice seen and heard.

Once you express that, don't feel like you need to plug what you're doing into the system the way it works now. Figure out your own way of doing it.

WILL CALHOUN: We're fathers. We're parents. There's a role we have, and that's exposure. The things that we're talking about, we need to expose the young folks. We can't tell them to build their own bridge, to build their own pyramids, to come up with their own math, and discover your own language, and figure out your own bebop, and your own hip hop, and your own blues. We have a job to do.

We have to expose them. We already got the scars, and the stars, and the stripes, and the failures, and the victories. Now we have to go back to them, and whether they want to listen to it or not, it could be a reference point for them, it could be a launching pad for them, but they can't do it by osmosis. We also have a role in that question about the future and the young people. As elders, we have a role to lay some of the groundwork out.

That's the important thing I like about the *Black Panther* film. With all the time I spent talking to my children about ancestors and my journeys is in the film they visit their ancestors. They get to go back and see and talk to them. Really important part of that film for a young person to be able to say, what would I say to grandma or great grandma if I was able to see her?

I heard about the cornbread recipe. I heard about the special Italian Sauce. Or I heard about the knishes grandma used to make, or whatever it is, what would you say? And that was a very important part of that movie, that there was actual contact. But the contact wasn't, let's hold hands and celebrate. The contact was questions, and curiosity, and how can I take that information and go back to where I have to go to and have a victory.

INTERVIEWER: On that note, Vernon Reid, Will Calhoun, Melvin Gibbs, thank you for joining us. It's been a pleasure, really.

VERNON REID: Thank you. Same here.

MELVIN GIBBS: Great questions. Thank you very much.

WILL CALHOUN: Thank you for having us.

MELVIN GIBBS: Thanks for having us.

INTERVIEWER: Our pleasure. Thank you.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

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