

AMP Seed Spring Season - Bloom

Event Transcript

Deep Work

Thursday, June 10th, 2021

Nandi Comer: My name is Nandi Comer, and welcome to the final session of the Allied Media Projects Spring Speaker Series BLOOM. Today's event is really close to my heart, it is Deep Work. We're gathered in this space with you, our audience, and today's guest, long time AMCer, interdisciplinary artist Sterling Toles, and accomplished artist, rapper, and all around Detroit people, Boldy James. Today we're gonna be discussing their collaboration "Manger on McNichols" and how the project came about, and how the trust between artists can give way to personal and collective transformation.

Allied Media Projects is an organization that has been cultivating media for liberation for over 20 years. Before we get started, I want to take a minute to acknowledge and uplift the rich history of Detroit, the city AMP calls home. Detroit sits on Anishinaabe land and that of other indigenous people. It is the largest majority black city in the nation with a long legacy of African diasporic global contributions, it was also once a stop on the Underground Railroad known by its code name, Midnight. Detroit is also the US city with the largest concentration of Arab Americans. It's a border city with Canada and has a growing Latinx community and a rich legacy of Asian American communities and movements. At all our events, virtual and in person, we encourage our audience to connect with the legacy of their cities, and so we invite you today to acknowledge the land and community where you reside. Feel free to put them in the chat right now. I just want to remind you all that this event is captioned, and we also have provided ASL and Spanish interpretation. And so let's get started.

I want to welcome you with an excerpt from the documentary produced by Cari Frazier from Detroit Is Different. He created a documentary based on the work that was produced by Boldy and Sterling, Manger on McNichols. The first track that we're going to show is "Welcome to 76".



WELCOME TO 76

(Welcome to 76)

Where very seldom do we run from the po's, tell em welcome to
myhumbleabode(welcome to 76)

On Stahalinwhere you get an award

For pullin' triggers, pourin' bullets in pours (76)

Homicide detectives, decoys, the Colonel and sarge

Got a picture of Ruff, me and Lard] in the middle of their bulletin board full of criminals

You get a reward for any info that you give, it's been sworn to secrecy

Once you snitch and inform them agencies, trust ain't a issue no more, basically

'Specially with me, I can't fuck with you snitches, dawg

So stay away from me, fuck that upper peninsula

Fillin' the vacancy, tell me how could you testify?

And squeal on your familia, look at me dead in my retina

But ConCreatures live forever and cowards die a thousand deaths

You welcome to 76

[Chorus]

[?] in the streets that robbed me

Of my innocence and my childhood dreams (welcome to 76)

I got some 1-2, 3-4, 5-slot, heavy metal pokin' out (welcome to 76)

I got the drug-free school zone high

You are a child of the universe

No less than the trees and stars



[Verse 2]

Where it's ConCreatures, gorgonites, and poltergeists, but you gotta love us (welcome to 76)

Where the guns we shoot on cock (blaa)

Smell the barrel on this bolt lock, fuckin' cocksucker (6)

Got the drug-free school zone high

God, tell the devil Boldy want a spot if I gotta suffer

Got some 1-2, 3-4, 5-slot, heavy metal pokin' out my side for you motherfuckin' sissies

Your boy an assassin, my city ain't no tourist attraction, this Detroit where shit happens

Nandi Comer: Hey y' all welcome back. So, welcome Sterling, welcome Boldy.

Sterling Toles: Thank you.

Boldy James: Thank you.

Nandi Comer: I just want to say thank you first for joining with us. I've been thinking about the work that Sterling has been telling me about for a long time. And then I got to see this product that came out, and then I got to see this crazy response to this product that came out. And then I was like, it feels like there is so much more that -- because I've been hearing from one side of this project. And so I thought it was really important to bring you all here to talk about it, because, in our community we really do think about the deep work that has to happen to get projects done.

So I just wanted to first start out, I feel like people that might be looking for y'all, already know who you all are. In the Detroit way, we need to like talk about who you are. And so in an intro kind of way, can you just tell us about yourselves, how you came through this kind of music in Detroit. And we're going to get to the project, but more about how you came to this work in Detroit.

Sterling Toles: So first off, man, I was always into music at an early age, my father was into music a whole lot. And I always tell people my introduction to music was more so jazz than hip hop. I knew who Grover Washington was before I knew Michael Jackson



was. So early on, I had a cousin that moved to Texas to go to Prairie View. And he started promoting a lot of the early hip-hop records. And he was responsible for those hip hop records moving across the South, and so I was probably like 7, 8, 9 at the time. And he started giving me records, and so he was kind of my introduction into the culture of music.

And then I had another cousin that had to be a part of one of the first rap groups in Detroit called the Beat Boys. They had a group like '82, '83. First people I ever saw rap live was them at my cousin's birthday party. And between one cousin moving records, and another cousin making records. By the time I was 8 or 9 I saw myself as being a participant. Joined a little rap group, we was the Nerdy Boys first. [Laughter] But yeah, so like from that point it was always on. And then, teenage years I started working with a dude named Anthony Singleton, that kind of brought me under his wing. And he was actually a mentee of Chuck D. He groomed me and kind of brought me in.

Boldy James: [Laughter] I always been a fan of the record player, you know what I'm saying. So growing up, and watching my granddad and my pops spin records, and sometimes my daddy would sit in the middle of the floor and air drum, you know what I'm saying, to whatever he was listening to, with his eyes closed. And I used to rap with my pops, he would let me pick whatever I wanted to hear on the radio. And then it started for me making skip tapes, and trying to stretch beats to pieces of instrumentals that would be left at the end of songs. I would try to stretch them, so I'd have beats and me and my homeboys could rap to it. They started out rapping first, and then I started out making the beats. I was probably like 6 or 7, and probably like 9 or 10 I started to write raps, and always said I wasn't confident to send them to anybody. And so, once I got the confidence to rap in front of my home boy and stopped messing with the beats and taking rhyming more seriously. And I started off with a group called RBN. Talking a whole bunch of shit we wasn't into. But it was just like, looking outside at the craziness going on in our neighbourhood and shit. We was like the first ghetto reporters of my time, you know what I'm saying.

Nandi Comer: I love hearing that. You are talkin -- we're around the same age, and I feel like I was also a backpacker, and also into like, hip hop, you know, and like, I feel like not enough people get to hear that because we're always hearing about how Motown has been the story.



Boldy James: Can I ask you a question?

Nandi Comer: What up?

Boldy James: What do you classify my rap? Am I backpack rap?

Nandi Comer: We be having conversations about this.

Boldy James: I want to know seriously. Because in school I never had a backpack. If you can find a picture of me with a backpack I'd give somebody a thousand dollars.

Nandi Comer: I wouldn't classify you as a backpacker. But also like, I'm talking 90s, cowrie shells, when everyone had dreadlock and every T-shirt had a message. And like, it's a 90's feel that I was like, around in that time. But I always felt frustrated.

Boldy James: So not a backpacker, but golden era rapper.

Sterling Toles: I'll say this, as someone who considers themselves a backpacker in that era. Thank you about it, you are the ambidextrous king of Detroit, meaning you are one of the very few people that embody the sensibilities and codes of not only the street stuff, but also the culture that is identified as underground hip hop, and backpack culture. You kind of, you stack up in both.

Boldy James: I was dealing with my cousin, and a couple of my homeboys having an argument a couple weeks ago if I was a backpack rapper, or gangsta rapper. And I don't know, it's not on me to decide, I guess.

Sterling Toles: You are to me, like you are a representation of all the facets of the culture and the industry.

Nandi Comer: Yeah, I have a long list of questions, and jumping around, and glad that you all spoke to that. Because one of the things I think about with how experiences come into play in the way in which music comes about, and my brother and I had been



talking a lot about this project, that y'all did together, he really loves the project, and we were talking about how the influence of being all these other places. And you are traveling all around a lot, and you are still coming back, and Sterling you have been in and out of Detroit, Not just the influence, but what has Detroit done to kind of shape that and stay grounded in the work you are doing? What is it about Detroit?

Boldy James: You miss Detroit when you are away from it. And when you are here, you just want to get away from it. [Laughter] Yeah, so once I started -- I started on the road, it was different than on the road now. Now it's all music. I'm familiar with these towns. And a lot of people in these towns. I know them from different things, you know what I mean. And that just opened up a world, and a whole other fan base and still, the demographic, they already classified me under. You know what I mean? It just broadened all my music horizons from being on the road for so long, nothing new to me. I just get homesick after a while. No matter how crazy this place is, how everybody else views it, it's still home.

Nandi Comer: I feel that.

Sterling Toles: I think also, it's a certain level of expressiveness we inherently have as Detroiters. I remember a friend of mine -- I never thought about this until she said it to me. She was like -- she's African American also. But she's like, "Y'all Detroit people are the most arrogant in your blackness," and I'm like "What do you mean by that!" She was like "Because you all grew up around black people you all have comfortability and confidence in your skin that Black people a lot of other places don't have. And I'm like, I never thought about that! 'Cause in some ways, I think we're very affirmed growing up here in a lot of different ways.

You know, and I think, you know, now, it's so funny, things have shifted. I never seen, this generation of people, like, they like out-Detroit each other right now. You think about the pieces and the payrolls, and the... like, they're so about being Detroiters now, where I remember in my era we almost had to assimilate to a degree in hopes of being let into the industry, almost playing down our Detroitness. And now in this Detroit vs everybody era. I think we always loved ourselves, but now it's like, we're starting to see, the fruits of just saying, "We're going to fully embrace it, whether people see it or not." And now it's resonating with people all over. And the culture of the city is so



intensely rich that, every time I listen to him, he's so much like the nooks and the crannies and the side streets of the city, in his stuff.

Boldy James: That just comes from... I'm in neighbourhoods on the regular, and it's just a regular day in the life of Boldy James. But people are not allowed on the blocks I live on. I already be on them back blocks.

Nandi Comer: I feel that.

Sterling Toles: And now it's dope, because the voices are being heard by people.

Boldy James: Detroit on top right now. You got Big Sean, you got Sada, you got Tee Grizzley, you got me. And you got all my east side youngins, burning it up on YouTube, and empire scene, and the underground street records that they. And you got Babyface making noise right now. And I know these people personally. And they are good guys. If I was to ever want to see them win out of Detroit rapping. It definitely had to be them. And so I'm just glad to see, my youngins doing anything other than adding to the problem at this point, you know what I'm saying?

Sterling Toles: On top of that real quick, what they have done is kind of unprecedented. They did what previous generations couldn't do, which was get beyond real life street -- and end up making music together, and putting it behind. And you know what I'm saying, you watch the young guys come in and resolve issues.

Boldy James: Some issues are unresolved.

Sterling Toles: Yeah, some.

Boldy James: But most of them have matured. They've grown as men. And they're great fathers, you know what I'm saying, and mentor their young. And I see nothing but growth, and I'm proud of all the young ghetto boys that came up from nothing and made something out of nothing. You know what I mean?





Nandi Comer: I love that. I love that. Oh, man, I really want to -- I'm going to ask you about this after we show this second clip. But, right now we're going to show another clip from the documentary if y' all don't mind, going back to Khary Frazier's documentary, who did beautiful visualizations of the album. So the second clip is Mommy Dearest.

MOMMY DEAREST:

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Get out of line, and I'm gunnin' you down, so stay in single file
'Fore you in the line of fire, tryna renege
Like you threw a nine of diamonds out when I led with spades
And you sittin' trump tight
We got hand grenades, I pull this pin, it's goodnight
Sleep tight, don't let the bedbugs bite
Keep a razor blade or jagged-edge butcher knife
Streetlife, don't catch them lead slugs, strike or get struck
Like a match, need a light? Light you up like a lamp
Lickin' shots like some cunt or a stamp
With my lightning and thunderous twin five-sevens
Mommy, my aunties, and grandma are stressin'
That I need a job but I can't stop peddlin' drugs
With them Drug Zone Concreature Spartans
I don't show love, I'm heartless

[Chorus]

'Cause she don't even love me like she did when I was younger
Seems to me she's showing favoritism to my younger sibling



Thinking, "I wonder if he even love me"
I love you, I just got a fucked up way of showin' it
'Cause she don't even-

Nandi Comer: Oh, man, I really love that film. And audience, if you all have a chance to take a look at it, it's up at Detroit is Different. That's another place that is also repping Detroit in a really dope way.

Sterling Toles: Absolutely, yeah, yeah.

Nandi Comer: So that track is also one of those tracks I really -- I keep playing. And it also reminds me of all the things Detroit in the album, and how y'all didn't just go this is a collaboration, and another question with that. But I wanted to talk about the project. It's not a project. I keep saying project, and no, that's not what this is. So what was it?

Boldy James: It was my first time visiting a shrink.

Sterling Toles: [Laughter] A shrink.

Boldy James: I didn't have money for therapy back then, this was my therapy. He literally drained all the evil out of me, and it took him 12 years to do it.

Nandi Comer: 12 years.

Boldy James: Yeah, this shit made me a better man. I used to write raps to this project before I actually record them, and rap them to my baby momma, and she said the music made her want to jump off a bridge. She said, "It's so dark, so morbid, and makes me want to jump off a fucking bridge every time I hear it." And I thought, maybe I should make more of that. I can't wait for you to jump off the bridge. [Laughter] I'm just playing. Just being silly.

But, what I was going through at that time in my head, I was in a real dark place. And you know what I'm saying, and so wanting to be more personal with the music and expressive to release those evils as opposed to suppressing them, and making me grow



into a bigger demon at some point. I was challenged by a lot of things, just trying to figure adulthood out. I was going into parenthood, and I had stepchildren I was raising. I had a rocky relationship, I never had a job, I never had a driver's license. I never had an honest dollar, you know what I'm saying. And so at that point, I was just in a weird state. You know what I mean, and Sterling was more so my therapist. The music was more therapeutic, than trying to make a project.

Sterling Toles: Because you gotta take into account, too, when I met him he was like 17 or 18. And to be real with you, I don't even consider myself to be a musician. The real work in my life is about collective healing and transformation. And I remember all those years of wanting to record and make music. And then finally had an opportunity to like, get some equipment, and be able to help other people record, and it's like, I wanted to give people the opportunity that I didn't have for a long time.

But when I started doing it, I realized it was even a deeper level, this could be a space that actually helps people work through stuff and process stuff, and it's so funny, because somebody was telling me that, like they feel almost bad listening to the album. They feel like they're being intrusive listening to somebody's personal business like they're eavesdropping. And the craziest thing is the realest stuff that was happening at the time ain't even on the record. Some of the situations and conversations that we had to have during the making of this projects is... 15 times more intense.

Boldy James: You know how they say, some people literally getting away with murder their whole life? You know what I mean? Like, due to guidance, from my brothers like, Sterling, and Nick Bruno, and I got good guys in my life, that give me really good advice. Not nothing like I want to hear, you know what I mean. So I'm just one of those kids that slipped through the cracks, and I'm here to live to tell about it. I'm just lucky.

Sterling Toles: And I hope you don't mind me saying this. But just to paint a picture how real it was, and how loving and protective the community of people around him was. Like, it was situations going on, where literally, they would bring them to my house, walk him to the door, and go back out to the car and sit in the car until he's done. He'd come out, they'd walk to the door and get him, and they'd get in the car and leave. It was that real. And so, like, those people he's referring to me, Murph. We protected him.



Like, you know, his life meant a lot to us. And not just because he was talented. But, just one of those things, where it was obviously like, just a really genuine and good spirit that needed an opportunity to get beyond the confines of the situation that landed on him.

Boldy James: It's deeper than that. Dej Loaf is actually on that album you're talking about right? First Lady Dej, right? That's what her name is on the album. She doesn't even remember it, because it was so long ago. And life was just so chaotic at that point for a lot of youngins that was in the city, from my era on down to hers. And there was a kid that stayed a couple doors down from Sterling. His name was Tommy, he was a good kid. I thought he was a good kid, but I could tell he was troubled. You know how you can just tell some kids are troubled? And I'm one of them so I can just recognize it.

Deja would come down to Sterling house, and she would record here and there. And she ended up doing some stuff on my album. I didn't know she was gonna turn out to be Dej Loaf later on in life. Sterling was like, just like he does now, helps a lot of children and people in life. And work in general, he really works with children. You know what I mean. He's been doing this, even when he wasn't getting paid to do it, with kids like me and Dej and Tommy. You know what I mean.

Nandi Comer: I feel you, I'm one of these people across several occasions. It feels like, that's what's the radical part of this work. That's why it's about the work. And I think people know that there is this longer story behind it. But they still reduce it to like, it was this album.

Boldy James: M-hm.

Nandi Comer: And I think to constantly go back -- because often times, there is the mythical story of somebody went to the Alps or some stranded place and really just lost themselves and was in the studio for a couple weeks and dropped this album. It's always the story of the album, and not really about the restorative work, the transformational work that had to happen, and then there was conversation about do you want to make it public? Do you want to get it out into the world? Right? And it changes the work. Because, then all of those sessions are so much more important. And so, I also, just



want -- and the audience is reminding me to thank you so much for telling the story and being vulnerable about telling that story. I feel like you could have --

Boldy James: It's my most personal work, I had a lot of projects coming out that year, I had a project come out at the end of the year prior to. And then I had 3 projects other than that one. And I knew that was my most personal project, and it meant the most to not only me and Sterling brotherhood, but who I am as an artist, it's my Illmatic. It's my first project I know that is my reasonable doubt. And the first album I worked my whole life to have the world to hear.

Sterling Toles: You said that right. Did you think I would ever finish it? I don't think you knew I would ever finish it.

Boldy James: No, I know you. That's one thing I know about you. I remember you gave me a gauge on how long this will take. It's going to take about 10 years. And I remember, like from the time it was almost 90% done, you were telling me that it's going to take 10 years to come out. And I'm like, okay. [Laughter] You know what I'm sayin.

Sterling Toles: And the craziest thing about it, yes, in actuality. This record is like a retroactive debut. But the thing is this. I didn't realize this until he said it. But he was like basically it was transformational, because as soon as we finished that process, because that process of him recording with me was from 2007 to 2010. When we finished that process that's really when his career started. It was almost like getting all that stuff out kinda was the seed that started everything, and the next thing you know, he was doing stuff with cool kids, and alchemists and he was off to the races. And I think that was just it. That process for me was about -- I didn't care how long it took. And at the same time, you know, you know me now. I never really cared about a career in this. You know what I'm saying.

And it's funny, because, you know, like, I'm a hood dude, I'm not a street dude: I was in the neighbourhood, and I wasn't doing street shit but I was there. And I feel like, I'm on the other side of things a lot of times, like, in terms of music, it's like I'm moving through this kind of illegally, and I'm going against all the laws of like, what you do to have a good sustainable career. And I think every step of the way I was willing to risk it



all for the sake of expressing truth. You know? So, I really didn't care how long that was going to take. But I just knew whenever it was finished, it was something I could look at and be like, what we created together was a pure expression.

Nandi Comer: So, I want to remind folks, because we're in the Zoom, and feels like we're just talking to each other, but there is people looking and listening, and I just wanted to remind folks if you have questions, we want to invite you to share them in the chat. And we can see all the love and support in the comments that y'all are making. And so if you have things, if you just want to express yourself about what you are hearing, definitely share that out.

I have -- you all are talking to it a little bit. But I think it's important to talk about the ways in which other people showed up. Right? So I remember listening and hearing instruments, the keyboards and cellos and guitars, and reading the backside and albums, these aren't samples that you pulled from other songs, but then you also have recordings of James Boggs in there. And there is so much in there where artists are showing up. And adrienne maree brown shows up, and Mother Cyborg shows up, and I was wondering if you can talk about how others are showing up in the process and healing, and how did they experience it as well.

Sterling Toles: I think the whole record is a reflection of relationships. And the thing was, everybody that was on that record genuinely wanted to be on a record. And I would offer like, "What do you need, what do you want me to give you?" and they would be like, "Nothing, don't ask me that." So I really don't have business relationships with people, I just have true, loving sincere relationships that become creative sometimes. And, so everybody on the album, they're all people that I love dearly.

And so, the funny part about it is, a lot of times, what they played was after a 4 or 5 hour conversation. Right? It was after spending a day together with that person, not even thinking about music, but just talking about life. And so for me, it's not even about the instruments that are being played. It's just, the instrument is just articulating the experience that we're having collectively, and then, I'm just documenting it by recording it. But in actuality, it's really just documenting the fluid spirit of our interactions. You know, and so to me, the album is a document of yeah, like, loving relationships in which Detroit is the backdrop.



You know, and just like, it's so funny. Because, like, what I am in terms of me being kind of everywhere in terms of organizing community in the city of Detroit. And the art community, and music. He's like, that in the streets. [Laughter] like, we're both those kind of people, where as like, we deal with everybody. You know. And I think that, it's only fitting that this album would be such a reflection of community, and I don't know, that may just have been in the spirit too. But definitely saw us, do things for a ton of people, and that's what he does. And he's probably on more Detroiter songs than any other Detroiter.

Boldy James: For sure. I can do what they can do to a degree. But I'm not gonna say they can't do what I do, they just don't challenge themselves enough. If they wanted to get in that bag, it's a lot of kids talented enough to figure that out. They don't understand why my style varies. On certain records I rap cool, calm, collected; on certain records I know how to turn it up a little bit. And I can hop on the trap records with them, and I can jump back on the song sample, I can jump back on the empty alchemist beat. I can rap over a Sterling Toles orchestra. [Laughter] And people don't know I actually raised ten children.

Sterling Toles: It was a community. And it was the community of it. You know, and that's the beautiful part about it to me too. You think of people like adrienne maree brown on the record, and Mother Cyborg.

Nandi Comer: And thinking of other people, I always get surprised by like Ian. Ian Fink is on there.

Sterling Toles: Yeah, Ian, and Asante, and people just learning how to play an instrument. Everything from virtuosos to people just starting. And again, I don't really care about technical prowess or how advanced you are in your craft, I really care more about the sincerity. Because to me the heart makes up for whatever you may lack in know-how. Like, somebody that knows 10 words of the English language can express themselves concisely based on how they arrange the words they know. And their ability to articulate that is just a matter of how in tune they are with their heart. And I feel like my job as a producer is to help remove all the obstructions till you see in your own heart fully. And that's what I do.



Nandi Comer: That's exactly what I was thinking. And you're really facilitating that as well. There are a lot of people that can be really traumatized to artists. They'll hear what you are saying, and how you are saying it and they are shut down and don't want to hear it. And I think part of this process is being... this openness, right? You said something about it being a reflection of relationships, and it feels like when you have something come out, and you have a conversation that is so vibrant, and draws people in so well, that, often times people want to institutionalize it. They want to replicate it, duplicate it, package it, and figure out how they did it. Let's try to figure out how to do that.

Sterling Toles: They're going to have to go through a lot of hard shit to replicate this.

Boldy James: Imitation is the greatest form of flattery. And I just listen to music to have fun. I'm not really playing the "who keeping it real" game. If I did that, that's a lot of things I wouldn't listen.

Nandi Comer: Yeah, I think I'm also thinking about, you know, in the organizing community often times you have people that are really developing loving spaces. For the community to come into and build faith.

Sterling Toles: Right.

Nandi Comer: The next question is, "When y'all gonna get something this? When y'all gonna do this?" And there is always this question of what to do next. And sometimes that value of the relationship is lost in that.

Sterling Toles: Right, and all these years, think about it, I was running the studio, that well over a few thousand people came to the studio, and I let them record for free. And, you know, it became a real thing. They're processing and working through trauma and they create music, and people be like, why don't you make us file a 1C3. And I'm like, no.

It's almost like having a sanctuary, and a lot of people come to the sanctuary, and they're like, "You know, if you put the gift shop in the sanctuary, you could clean up, like make a few gift cards. And you know, y'all would do well, and pay all the bills and



everything.” But then it gets to the point where all the traffic from the gift shop is messing up the sanctuary. And for me it was about keeping the sanctuary a sanctuary. We figure out how the lights are going to stay on, but we're going to keep the sanctuary the sanctuary. And Boldy could have been like, “I'm going to record.” And I could be like, “No, not tonight, somebody is going to pay me 20 an hour. Can you come next Thursday?”

Boldy James: [Laughter] That's definitely how they be playing.

Sterling Toles: It's like no. Whenever he needed. Did I ever -- anytime he's like, “I want to record,” I'm like, “No, can't do that right now.” Whenever he was trying to record, he was recording. Because, that's one thing too, understanding when somebody's ready. You know what I'm saying. I want to... I want to be ready when the water breaks to give birth.

Nandi Comer: I love that, keeping the sanctuary a sanctuary. So we have two kind of related comments, questions from the audience, and so I want to bring them into the room, in a sense, virtually. And Gabriel C says --

Sterling Toles: Who said?

Nandi Comer: Gabriel C, I hope I was saying this right. Apparently Sterling was being reached out to before this, so he's checking to see who. I feel like us as the audience can feel that the album is full of emotion, from the rapping to instrumentals, it's amazing. I think we all feel that. We definitely -- and then, Jeff, I think is how you pronounce it. Apologies if I did not pronounce your name right. Jeff R. There's a question for Sterling. “I love that the beats on the album have a living and breathing quality. Can you talk a little bit about the Jazz influence on the project which gives the record that feel?”

Sterling Toles: First off, I think I've always been enamored by this question, like, what would it sound like if John Coltrane or Ornette Coleman or Eric D'offay would have made a record? You know like, what, what would it look like if they had grown up in that era? So that, that was one. I think for me a lot of ways jazz. And as much as I love beat



making and programmed stuff, I think I've been yearning to hear a certain level of fluidity that felt like a lot of the jazz records that I appreciated.

And so this record kind of worked in reverse where, like the initial tracks that Boldy rapped to, it was just chops, samples, and drums, basically. But I composed the music around him. And so the thing was -- my thing was always, to be rooted in the spirit of improvisation. And so, like, I had his vocals, and then, I would do a run through myself of a loose arrangement listening to the vocals and musicians would come in and play. And then I would sculpt it around that. And so the anatomy of what you hear on that record, comes from improvisation. It's just the details were flushed out, but the spirit of it is improvisation, and why it has a certain level of fluidity to it.

Also in terms of jazz, I intentionally wanted to put him in a presence of the jazz palette, because in terms to have music that people consider to be spiritual, or high-thinking, or intellectual or, you know, like embodying the greatest sense of, you know, emotional intelligence and awareness like jazz often gets that. And a lot of times, people shit on the brilliance of our young people writing, and so if jazz is considered brilliant and intelligent and thoughtful, and all these things, it's like, don't forget these young guys that come from these neighborhoods are as brilliant and wise and knowledgeable. And to me Boldy has always been a poet. And it was important for me to wherever the album was centered, it would be in a space that was outside of the jurisdiction you expected to be. 'Cause I wanted to have a backdrop like, now you are not listening to Boldy as a rapper, but as an artist.

Boldy James: Like when you meet your famous artist for the first time, up until that point, you always wonder what you are going to say when you meet them. If I ever met Nas, if I ever met Jay-Z, you know what I mean? And so I used to actually, you know, ponder on that sometimes. And when I met Nas, I was introduced to Nas through DJ -- I met him through my master-peer relationship. But I was introduced through DJ -- and he broke the ice for me and Nas. It was kind of like organic. And we'd just pick up where the conversation leave off. You know what I mean.

But when I met Jay-Z it was at Club Nova. One of the last shows of the tour before COVID had hit. It was like, I think March 6th. He walks up, and comes backstage, and I'm dehydrated so I'm damn near about to pass out. So I'm trying to get in the dressing room and get some water, but for some reason someone told me don't go in the dressing room. Me and my man Chase were standing by the dressing room, and I



was trying to get myself together, you know, there, to keep from fainting. And I seen Jay come from backstage, and he got to walking up on me, and when he got close to me he put his hand on my shoulder, and he said, “Mr. Boldy James, you have an incredible thing, keep up the good work.” And I'm sitting there like blew the fuck away, and it's my turn to talk, and I don't know what to say. And so, that type of stamp, that type of approval from the greats. And he went off and took a picture. And I'm standing looking at my man Chase, like, “damn, did he just walk up to me and say that?”

[Laughter] And I'm just saying that to say this: I never really questioned the things that I write. Because I know it was helping me, you know, heal as a person. And it was releasing my evil demons. And just putting awareness to like, I got to make better conscious decisions or my life could take a turn for the worse at some point, you know what I mean? But, I always feel like for the most part I knew what I was doing, you know what I mean. And I'm not saying the wrong shit, is worded right. It might not be grammatically correct, but that's on purpose a lot of the time. You know what I mean, but trying to get my point across. And trying to stress the point of who I am, and where I come from, and what I'm about, and what I stand for, and what I stand on. And I think the neighborhood has sharpened me up to being the artist that I am today, but it was just a lot of lessons learned, and that shit can't be duplicated. You can't just write that shit out of thin air. You have to have at least went through most of the emotions of rip and running the streets. And you're going to lose some people, you're gonna go to jail. And some bullets going to fly. And be some hightail bitches that try to use you for your money. And that's a lot of bullets fly in the streets. And me and Sterling, he's like Morpeus and I'm like Neo, and we see in slow motion and a lot of people can't.

Nandi Comer: And also, it feels like, there's also this like support system that's the air under you, that's where you're doing all the moves, the people that's moving with you. It's not just Sterling, but a whole other community that is yours, and mine. And you know. So, we have a young person, Kevin Bailey, who put in the chat talking about young folks, you know, they want you to check out what they're doing.

Boldy James: We would love to.



Nandi Comer: So I'll share those comments with you all. And they also asked a question about -- to you Boldy in particular. Can you describe this process of your zone, where you create special records, like III Advised, and Alchemist, like how are you?

Boldy James: I'm usually smoked out.

Nandi Comer: That's real.

Boldy James: Keeping it real. I smoke me some trees. For some reason, I can write in any situation. I can write in jail, I can write in the passenger seat of somebody's car, doesn't have to be a beat playing, on the road, on a bus, on a plane. And I find any zone, just knowing that that's something I love to do. I'm really passionate about writing. And so, you know, I can find my zone anywhere. As long as doing something I love to do. Which, music is something I love to do more than a lot of things, and so it's not hard to find my zone. My concentration can be broken and everything, and I still can make it happen.

Nandi Comer: And that's also when you know that's what you want to be doing.

Boldy James: It's therapy. Some people write raps for the appeasement of the response they get from others. That's not why I rhyme. I rhyme because it's a healing process. It's like releasing my evils. It's like, getting all these, it's like getting this dark cloud out from under me. You know what I mean.

Nandi Comer: So I'm going to squeeze in one more question. It's also about the process, and I know we have other questions, and want to make sure the one answered that was asked a little bit earlier. And thinking about this too, so, Boldy you had these tracks that you had like recorded, and then what is your first reaction when you heard the new production, considering they seemed to be like different than when you originally rapped over.

Boldy James: I was just blown away, because there was so much more to it than the original shell of it, that I left it in. You know what I mean? It's like, this real -- see, 'cause Alchemist, he listened to it once. And then, he wasn't -- he never said it was whack --



but he didn't give me the type of compliment it deserves. And then once he really listened to it, he's like, hey, this Sterling guy is fucking insane. And it's like, do you know all the shit going on, and he's like a musical genius. And I'm like, I know he brought out the goddamn opera to do this shit.

Sterling Toles: Opera. [Laughter]

Boldy James: But Al doesn't, I don't think he ever had a project, where he got a whole bunch of live instrumentation from the musicians. I'm pretty sure he has done it before, but not to the degree Sterling did. Sterling have them playing flute, and violin, and trombone, and the sea shell, and you know what I mean. He got somebody playing xylophone. He's different, man.

Nandi Comer: I feel like that's always why I think of the project, of being one on one kind of thing, where they think of like, producer, which feels -- like producer and rapping coming into the room and doing their thing.

Boldy James: It was that too. But --

Nandi Comer: Go ahead.

Boldy James: If you could look at his paintings, like his art, you can tell he has it. His brain works different. You know what I mean, so his vision for this project was, okay, you left it as a shell, but watch when I get done with it. He had that look on his face, like, "When I get done with this, this shit is going to blow everybody away, I'm about to do shit to this." And the next time I heard it, it was exactly -- it made me feel exactly how he was looking when he was telling me how it was going to sound when it was complete.

Nandi Comer: M-hm, m-hm. So we run out of time, I'm going to squeeze one thing in here, the painting you are talking about, there is one behind y'all right now. That beautiful piece is also included on the vinyl, which is sold out. You are all like the patty pies of albums on Bandcamp. Y'all just sell out every time y'all drop more albums. You can get the digital download from Bandcamp, if the audience is interested. But I don't know -- but you do have hoodies I'm told.



Sterling Toles: Thank you, yeah.

Boldy James: We do.

Nandi Comer: I'm really happy for this one, so I'm going to keep mine close to me. And people hit people up online trying to get it. But, so we're going to close.

Boldy James: I have to drop again on yall. Y'all not ready for what I'm about to come with this thing. I've got the wizardry to my lyricism.

Sterling Toles: That is true, that is true.

Nandi Comer: We're going to close out with another clip from the documentary. But before we close out, we won't be returning, so I just wanted to thank you so much, because this has been a really great conversation. I love everything we got to hear, where, like, I'm sure, I'm sure the audience is as inspired and energized as I am today. Thank you, Sterling, thank you, Boldy, and thank you for sharing the time with us.

And thank you to the audience. And thank you for your questions, the chat, the social media and everything you all have been doing online and off. And also I want to just really thank you to the ASL, cart, and Spanish interpreters, because you all have really opened up what we can do for the audience, and for the whole series.

This event was recorded and will be made available online in a couple weeks. If you want to let us know about your thoughts today, and about today's conversation, you can hit us up by clicking on bit.ly/AMPBloomFeedback. We'd love to hear from you. We're gonna come back with more events in the fall, so stay tuned. If you sign up for the AMP newsletter at alliedmedia.org, you'll here more about that. And we'll see you soon, so I'm gonna turn it over to the last track which is River Rock. The visualization by Khari. Thanks so much for coming.

DETROIT RIVER ROCK

Hell block, Six Mile, drug zone 76
Concreatures, yeah (on blocks, yeah)





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Okay

[Verse 1]

I do dirt with them snakes in the grass
I move work off of Pickford Ave, where we
Shoot first, ask questions last, like (*brrrrr!*)
The truth hurts like pickin' a scab
To do dirt, got a temporary tag
When I'm puttin' in work and I'm leanin' out the ride, like (*brrrrr!*)
Stick 'em, ha, ha-ha, stick 'em
Up, I'm pissed 'cause I shot and I missed 'em, but
Pressure bust pipes and my pressure up (yup, yup)
Retaliation is a must
What I'ma hit you with, you motherfuckers better duck
Bullets is cheaper than booth rent, so press your luck

[Chorus]

Clip fall, drop, reload
Lock and load
Click, draw, cock and hold
Rock 'n roll
Discharge, fire in the hole, like (*brrrrr!*)
Clip fall, drop, reload
Lock and load
Click, draw, cock and hold
Rock 'n roll
Discharge, fire in the hole, like (*brrrrr!*)

[Verse 2]

Get your life stole, and I'm the Grinch to do it
Never let your right know what your left is doin'
Had to ride on 'em, but I kept it movin'
Do not let a tear fall from your eye
Before I let that happen
I'll shoot him and ten niggas who look just like him





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In my felony cell, tellin' myself:
Do not let a tear fall from your eye
No matter what happens, troopin' sentencing
More murder, keep ratchets
To shoot these niggas with, don't worry, be happy, like
Do not let a tear fall from your eye
'Cause ConCreatures smell fear
My man doin' a life sentence on his twelfth year
They threw the book at him and he didn't even tear up
Do not let a tear fall from your eye

[Chorus]
Clip fall, drop, reload
Lock and load
Click, draw, cock and hold

