

Is André 3000 the Most Free Black Man in America?

By joahspearman

Last night, at the IMAX theater in Emeryville, just outside of Oakland, I witnessed a performance that moved me to tears by one-half of the legendary hip-hop duo OutKast. I grew up in Greenville, South Carolina, a short drive up I-85 from Atlanta, in the '90s and knew OutKast lyrics like white mothers with white SUVs know suburban streets. Like countless others, I've followed André Benjamin's journey for nearly three decades from his ATLieN days to the influential Speakerboxxx/The Love Below album that included the mega-hit "Hey Ya" (us true fans know "Prototype" is the real banger on the album) and inspired the likes of Kanye and Drake to a tireless stream of random fan encounters around the world a la Keanu Reeves, only André has often been spotted carrying (and playing) a flute.



André 3000 [takes his live show on the road](#) starting this week.

Last night's one-night-only IMAX performance wasn't André 3000 giving us a visual album akin to Beyoncé or a concert movie similar to Taylor Swift's recent Eras box office juggernaut. This was something we'd never seen before, especially from a Black man or a rapper; something with more in common with a MoMA performance art piece by Marina Abramović or, for something more contemporary, Bo Burnham's pandemic-masterminded special *Inside* on Netflix. Misty Copeland holds closer kinship with the movement we saw from Three Stacks last night than anything we've ever seen from any street-life-educated, swagger-injected, braggadocious rapper.

“You can can do anything you put your mind to.”

So far, I've spent the better part of my 40 years being inspired by people putting their mind to being the best in their chosen field be it sports, a creative endeavor or business and dealmaking, becoming famous and renowned, making oodles of money and living in comfort, making it out after humble beginnings, and getting awards and industry or critical recognition. These are all worthy of attention and accomplishments in their own right.

But what I hadn't yet seen is what exactly that earns a person. I had yet to see exactly what true freedom could look like—beyond the notion of “f-you money”—for a person with all that success behind them. At least not from and by a Black man in America. Even Drake is going to be measured on hitmaking and Steph Curry on his ability to win another title or not.

Last night, my contact fell out of my eye mid-show after realizing I was getting teary-eyed because, I saw what that saying really looks like when a famous Black man has won the hard battles to be truly free.

Being anything you put your mind to has always been positioned as a professional statement, but what if we've had it wrong the whole time; what if it's a spiritual one? What if only God can show us the full extent of what our minds should be put to? André didn't give us a flute-filled New Blue Sun album because he wanted to add to OutKast's legacy, but because he had a personal aim to please himself and his highest self. He simply wanted to make something beautiful, as he told us last night in the post-performance Q&A.

After seeing André last night, I'm also reminded of the phrase, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," as Andre showed us that the beholder can be within.

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While I was happy to see Paul Giamatti, one of my absolute favorite actors (Chuck Rhoades from *Billions* is one of TV's most iconic characters), take home a Golden Globe for his inspired leading man performance in *The Holdovers*, I remain certain it was not a scheduling conflict keeping him from being an early studio favorite to be cast for the role as Ken in Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* (a role Ryan Gosling played to a well-earned Oscar nod). Hollywood beauty's beholder(s) are more likely casting director than spiritual leaders. They're definitely not Black.

And Giamatti may not have Gosling's looks, but [he's got a freedom about him](#) that I imagine is what f-you money feels like. Maybe he's more Axe than Chuck after all, but what's clear is Giamatti appears comfortable in his own skin and his acting career has only benefitted from it. Thankfully this is a different model of self assuredness than what we are seeing from the GOP front runner in the election.

Which brings me back to that over-used elementary school teacher phrase. Should we be told that we can do anything we put our minds to? If you're a Black man, should you go around putting your mind to walking home at night in a hoodie? It's clear there can be high consequences if there's a wannabe cop on neighborhood watch. If you're a Black woman, should you circumvent the traditional Hollywood studios to get your film made as Ava Duvernay recently did with her masterpiece adaptation *Origin*? Not if you want an Oscar nomination, something Gosling has but neither Duvernay nor her female lead Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor picked up this go-round despite remarkable roles behind and in front of the lens. The most common response to Black men is to just keep going in spite of the fears and frustrating inequities. Do your thing. #BlackExcellence.

But in an era where #BlackExcellence is heaped onto legendary athletes and entertainers and moguls such as LeBron James and Jay Z and Oprah Winfrey, the one thing #BlackExcellence has seldom shown us is what freedom looks like. The kind of freedom that has absolutely zero focus on if something is perceived — by society or, to a higher standard in some rooms, by the Black community (including what's left of Black Twitter) — as good or cool or “the best” or even right. Put simply, outside of white-led institutions, we've never seen #BlackExcellence separated from societal excellence in the eyes of the beholder(s). In fact, much of #BlackExcellence has been co-opted and capitalized into a corporate version of AAVE vis a vis “gettin' the bag.”

As the hundred or more odd fans sat in Theater 8 at the AMC Bay Street 16 watching this 48-year-old Black man of past acclaim, fame and wealth, sit, move, shuffle, swivel, and outright play — sometimes with just his body and other times with totems that were akin to toys (a ball, a construction cone, a pair of sneakers) — I had the feeling that André's comfort — in front of a live national audience, in that small blue-tinted room that made for something of a stage in the Terrance Nance-directed piece, and in his very own skin — was making some of the audience members uncomfortable. A few folks stood up and walked out of the theater just minutes into the performance as if to throw up their hands in disappointment reminding me of some of the initial reaction to Dre

dropping an album with no lyrics, no rhymes and no beats (unless you count the occasional bells, chimes, cymbals and gong Carlos Niño, 3000's production and musical partner for much of the album, plays).

But André couldn't see those audience members leaving his performance, and something tells me even his artistic sensitivities wouldn't have allowed him to leave the safe, child-like space he had created for himself. He appeared to be playing like a toddler at times and then in a trance in moments and then in the kind of boredom that yields deep creative introspection (and output) in others. It was mesmerizing in a way I've never felt amidst crowds at Coachella or Madison Square Garden or the Tabernacle in Atlanta. I think others felt it, too.

The rest of us stayed, and watched, and listened, and we were transformed into less of a musician's audience and more of a museum guests or, better yet, witnesses. It wasn't until the interview with Random Acts of Flyness creator Terrance Nance after the performance that we got a slight breather to start re-entering the real world we had left to arrive in this one-night-only space. Now it was time to reposition what we'd seen back into the constructs of America, of #BlackExcellence.



There was no clapping after each song the way you'd expect at a concert nor was there any live instrumentation. The only instrument we witnessed and experienced was that of André 3000, a Black man of nearly 50 years, someone we've seen aplenty and come to know and love over nearly three decades, here being as free as I've ever seen a Black man be in any public setting. Gone were any concerns about safety or society or whether or not this (whatever "this" was) was going to be perceived as dope or even talented or the right way or something that was going to allow him to "get a bag." Where LeBron makes moves that add to his rightful status as the GOAT and Jay Z makes moves that bolster his well-earned mogul credentials, here was one of the most beloved Black men in America of the last few decades doing something so far left of center it may as well been an alien on stage showing us how they get down 3000 light years away.

But then I remembered it was.