

You're tuned into a kind of harmony. In this podcast, we're looking to transcend the physical limitations of daily life. In each episode, we speak with a different practitioner who uses sound as a tool or method for connection, transcendence and healing. We're your hosts, Julia E. Dyck and Amanda Harvey.

In this episode we spoke with backwash, aka Ashanti Mutinta. She is a Zambian Canadian rapper and producer based in Montreal, Quebec. She's most noted for her 2020 Polaris Music Prize winning album, *God has nothing to do with this, leave him out of it*. Her work is based in the Horrorcore, hip hop and industrial music genres, and includes a combination of themes around the intersection between faith, identity, and queerness. The poetry of her lyrics are the beginning of a cathartic healing process, in which she's granting herself permission to be angry. In 2021, backwash released her third album, titled, *I lie here buried with my rings and my dresses*, and announced that it would be the second album in a trilogy. Whereas *God has nothing* was a study in mercy and forgiveness, and provided some semblance of hope, *I lie here buried* presents backwash finding solace in being completely consumed by her malevolent behaviors. Her latest album, *his happiness shall come first*, even though we are suffering, 2022 is the final lp in the trilogy. It is entirely self produced. We were curious to speak with Ashanti about her practice as a musician. We discussed sound as a decolonial force, rage as catharsis and sampling as a way to reconnect with lineage and place.

Ashanti

My name is Ashanti. I go by the stage name of backwash. You know, I'm a rapper, producer, musician. vocalist, And my practice is contained in if I had to describe it, and just put it on paper, I would just say my practice has to do with deliberate rage and kind of transforming all of those feelings into something at the end. So I like to say deliberate because it's not rage for the sake of rage, which in itself is rage for the sake of rage is pretty common in the music sense. But this is rage that is based on my experiences, and that is taken and kind of transformed into sound itself.

Amanda

I love the way that you've described. The reason why you say deliberate rage.

Thank you. Yeah, yeah, yeah, I think like, you know, there is art, which is just rage for the sake of rage, which I also like, as well. But I think this one's more concentrated and deliberate.

I really appreciate that. Thank you. I was wondering if you could talk about your process for creating an album, whether it's conceptualizing, writing, recording or all of those things.

Yes, I guess before I did *God is nothing* I used to just go into albums with, you know, my albums are more just like a collection of tracks without any single thread kind of binding them together. And when I started doing *God has nothing* I like to hear and his happiness. The most important thing when it comes to creating the album for me is feeling. You know, other practitioners have this thread of maybe like an ongoing story, ongoing sound, but for me, it's kind of like the feeling that it gives you being the most important part when coming up with the sense of what the album is like. So for *god is nothing*. It was kind of just like, dark and melancholy and there was just like, so much anger from like, start to finish.

And then his happiness was just kind of like so much more. It was more like more sadness more than anything else. And just kind of like, you know, this is where the feeling of like, alright, this is where the story ends type of thing. So, like the process of me creating an album is okay, what is this album supposed to feel like? And then what am I going to do differently is the second thing that I like to think about, because I've heard the criticism that my music kind of sounds similar, but the process of coming up with the music, there are different things that go into it. So with God has nothing, I was teaching myself how to sample, and then I lie here, and stigmata in the middle of it, which is an EP, and I was teaching myself how to layer drums and light here is kind of like, I was working with like more aggressive textures. And then his happiness is kind of like, Alright, now I'm working with more melody in that industrial cacophony. So after I've got the mood, and after God, what new thing am I going to do here, the thing that comes at the end is making the beats making the beats is the first part of kind of like the process to composition. So I usually like make these based on the feeling that I have in my head. And then if I feel like this would be a good beat for the project, I ended up writing for it. But most of the times the beats that I don't feel as if fit the project don't even like make it to like the export phase. So most of the ones that are exported are the ones which I'm like really filling. So after it's been exported, the writing process now comes in, and then record it. And then the really important step is the mixing. And I was grateful enough to have someone like will omen who ends up, you know, kind of like being on the same wavelength when it comes to me when it comes to the type of music I'm making, that they're able to mix my music without distorting it too much. And then the end product is just refining, essentially all of those stages that you've done to get to that point. And each time I've done with the beat, I liked evaluating to see if there are any session musicians that could make this much better, especially for something like his happiness, because there's a lot of guitar on that album, like distorted guitar and I don't really know how to play it again, like thought instruments in the bass tees, but I can't really plot I can't really like play guitars if and only get that like real feeling if especially I want a melody that is complex. So that was just like another step within like the beat making process. But I guess just to summarize the things first step feeling. Second step is Oh, I forgot one important part. The first part actually is watching a horror movie being inspired by it and then grabbing a line from that movie to be the title of the album. So God is nothing came from this movie Veronica, and it was a line in the movie Veronica, I live here it came from The Haunting of life Mina, and his happiness came from this horror movie called eerie. So once I get the title, I get the feeling that from filming the next steps come in which is right in the making beats the new thing that I needed to learn when I'm producing so that's essentially how I got to the process of creating albums.

Amanda

Wow, seems very regimented all of the different stages that you kind of have. I love that it starts with inspiration from a film and then you kind of are trying to like find that this feeling and you do all the production yourself.

Ashanti

Yeah, it took a while. I only started rapping on my own beats when I did deviancy because I was so convinced that everybody else has a much better beat maker than I was and you know I was really sad about it but I went into like still work on projects so I would still you know rapping on people's beats but I

would tell myself like you know, maybe one day I'm gonna rap on my own shit. And then I heard this podcast with like Royster five nine and he lit like a spike in my brain that said, you don't really have to be the greatest beat maker in the world. You just have to make the beats that fit for you. And that kind of like inspired me to kind of create this sound, which makes sense just like metal noise. I know these like industrial and other these like harsh genres because that sound is like me at that point and it just made sense for me to create it that way. And when Royster five nine say that it kind of lit like a fuse in my mind that says, you know, that is right, I'm not trying to make like the greatest like instrumental ever. I just want to make the beat that is right for me and who else knows how to make the best beats for me.

Amanda

So I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about the traditional healing practices of ngoma meaning drums of affliction and how this influences and or inspires your own work.

Ashanti

Yeah, so then ngoma is a very important kind of like instrument where I grew up, you essentially almost knew somebody who could play then ngoma, I think they call it like the djembe. I think that's the like usual name for it, like the djembe in VTS. I think it's called that but we call it like, ngoma drums. Yeah. And it was something that we were around a lot when it comes to like music day at school, than going to a party somewhere there. And it's very accessible and used in like a lot of traditional cultures for like, their practices, you're the probably somebody playing ngoma drums with like someone singing in most of like the traditional ceremonies that you see. So I'm part of the Chichewa tribe. I'm also part of the Tumbuka tribe. And the Chichewa side has got this ceremony, and the Tumbuka side has got the Vimbuza and a lot of my I guess, sample work because it means just to connect with where I'm from, uses sound bites from these places. Because to me, it's kind of like my way of reconnecting with where I'm from. Since you know, I don't know if that's going to happen anytime soon, because of where I am on my situation. But that's essentially my way of like, okay, this is me, and I'm going to reconnect, because this is where I'm from. So if a lot of the songs like fells, and you know, 686, and Masaka, and black sheep, when they're using all the sound bites, then go my drum is always playing in the background, because it's spiritual, you know, the sound of like, the beating drums, almost like a beating heart and its spiritual and I just like to kind of like mix, that feeling of the place that I'm from with the stuff that I'm doing right now to create something that is, in my sense, makes the most sense to me. And it's my way of honoring my ancestors.

Amanda

Wondering if you feel that music can be a decolonial force, or a way to heal from colonial trauma.

Ashanti

My perspective on that is music, in terms of children from colonial trauma, is something that has always existed when the British came by, and it did their thing. And then, you know, people were still writing songs about the ramifications of colonization in itself. And, you know, though, also just writing songs

just to cope with like, the traumas that were left behind. And, you know, I think music as something that is healing, you know, coping mechanism is something that's been very prevalent, and I agree that for us to essentially cope with that trauma, music is something that we use a lot. And now in terms of the structures that are in place, that's a bit much more difficult because you start going into the structures just from an economic standpoint that colonialism was left behind and how that affects the music industry, and how that affects kind of like racialized people in it. So there's a separation between like music as an art form is something that can help us cope music sake as a structure, and an industry is something that still needs like a lot of work.

Amanda

Definitely, I do see the inherent work that is needed to make things better and more accessible for all. And your past three albums are primarily I guess, autobiographical? Yes. How do you engage with music making to process your own experiences?

Ashanti

Yeah, so God has nothing, and his happiness were definitely autobiographical. And essentially going back in time, because God has nothing was kind of like present day what I was feeling during that time I live here it goes back to my adolescence to like, early adulthood. And then his happiness is something that should take me back to my time when I was back in Zambia. And it's kind of like a weird experience, because you're putting yourself under this microscope, and you're writing, or I'm doing things that maybe just stood at the back of your brain, but now you're bringing them to the forefront. As I write, like, what has not been one of the first things that I said, I never realized how depressed I am. But like, I'm depressed as hell. And it's very interesting, because it kind of gives you a chance to just like, look at yourself from like, the lyrics that you've written and kind of be like, wow, you know, and that's not something that we usually get. So some would say it's therapeutic. I don't think it really says like that for therapy that I didn't need and would need. But I think from the perspective of gaining more insight into the person that you are, I think autobiographical albums are a really good tool. I was watching this TV show, the rehearsal by Nathan fielder. And he reaches a point where so as TV show of another theater where He's rehearsing scenarios. And there's one point where he was teaching a class and one of the people want that receptive to his methods. So he created a replica of the class that is teaching and had someone else act as him. And he came in as one of the students who are receptive, and he was able to kind of like see himself from like, the third person. I really like that because I think that is what the album's allow me to do. And kind of like face facts about your experiences, and how you'd like to deal with them.

Amanda

I love that. You use the rehearsal as an example, that show was so wild to me.

Ashanti

Oh, wow. I like my jaw was dropping, but like last episode, I was like, come on.

Amanda

But I also love this idea of being able to see yourself from this almost third person perspective through the process of creating your albums and how you've just said, like, you didn't realize what was going on in your psyche, or like, you know, quote, unquote, how depressed you were until you were kind of confronted with it through your own work. And I think that's really quite interesting.

Ashanti

Yeah, it was. So when I was making the albums, the first album that I started with was God is nothing. And then I think the first song that I wrote was, amen. And amen was this, like, you know, it's more political than the rest of the cuts in there. And the first like, two songs I wrote after that, well, black magic, and the goal is not an intro. And because I did do this before, and I didn't want to be political again, because like, I've already done that, and I wasn't that successful in it in terms of just the execution and there, you know, tons of people who can do political messaging far, much better than me. So I left it alone. And one thing that I felt was missing in other music that I did before was just my personal connection to the lyrics themselves. It's like, I don't want to talk about their pressure. I want to talk about me. And when the first like, versus what is nothing came out. That's when I was like, Oh, something is wrong, because sometimes you're in a state of depression and you don't even know you're depressed. But like, putting that on paper kind of like made it clear for me like that. This is kind of this kind of fucked up.

Amanda

And do you feel having that kind of in front of you on paper helps you to move through those emotions because now you have more of like a concrete idea of What's your feeling? Or not at all?

Ashanti

Yeah, it helped me formulate what was happening. Because if I went before and talk to therapists, I wouldn't have like the slightest idea to tell them what's wrong with me. But like, after that was written, it kind of like unraveled a lot of stuff that was living inside my brain. And I've never been one to be confrontational. So some of the lyrics in their world competition are kind of like, unleashed a lot of the feelings that I had at that, at that time. Wow.

Amanda

When it comes to, you know, actually performing in front of an audience, how does it feel to perform this material? And do you feel in kind of the same light the process of performing is healing or ritualistic for you? In any way?

Ashanti

Yeah, it kind of feels like hidden for me. I didn't know how I felt about it before. Because one thing I forgot is to put it mildly, it's like, the beats were banging. So like, I would perform like these sad songs, but like, the beats are, like, have so much momentum under it that people start like moshing or dancing. And at first, I was like, Oh, I don't even know what to feel about this. Like, should I tell people not to react that way. But then the more that I did it, the more that around this, like, sad set would be smiles and tears of joy at the end of it. And I'm just like, I'm happy. I could put this out. And people who have gone to, like a similar situation can connect with it, and just having people approached me at the end of the shows being like, Yo, I'm, I was like, you know, in this, like, messed up situation. And I, you know, I heard this album that as soon as I was like, waiting for like, my HRT appointment and shit like that. And, you know, that kind of, like, touches me. Because when you're out there, you're like, Why are these people having a good time? But do they really care? Then when people approach you like that afterwards? You know, it's like, Alright, maybe they do care. And, to me, that's much worth more than any award that you can get, just like having people connect to your music that much is something special for me. So the performance now in my mind became more like helium. You know, I feel I feel like a banshee when I'm up on that stage with like, the dress flowing and, you know, rocking out the hair back and forth that screaming. But like, just the feeling onstage at the feeling right after it can ever be replaced by anything. So yeah, I think it's like a healing process.

Amanda

I've seen you perform, and I feel that it is so powerful. You have such a powerful stage presence. And I love this kind of imagery of a banshee with the dress flowing. Do you ever feel surprised by the reactions that you get from folks who approach you after one of your performances?

Ashanti

Yeah. Yeah, I guess vice by the reactions that come afterwards. I guess it's even like, you know, the most much of dudes show up in the zoo. Oh, I like that a lot. I'm straight. I don't like that. I like what you did, you know, shit like that. And just having people of different backgrounds connect with it has always been surprising, because, you know, when I'm making this, I'm always like, you know, Are people really gonna care that much? When I'm up on that stage, I'm having fun, but I'm like, How much does people care really and then they approached me out of the show, and I'm like, alright, this makes me feel much better. And it's great. And connecting with like, just like the black kids as well. Just like weird black kids who make good music as as my favorite because when I was young, and kind of like looking for this type of music, it was there and those people doing it, but he had to like really go and find people that were doing this type of like genre and just connecting with like the black kids that show up and say I'm happy. There are more of us around and this is the greatest.

Amanda

It's very clear that your music and performances offer cathartic and transformative experiences for your listeners. And I'm wondering, you know, to what extent do you consider the listeners experience when you're writing or when you're performing?

Ashanti

I don't really consider the listeners experience when I'm coming up with the songs, because, okay, no, that's not entirely true. When I'm coming, I guess from a technical sense, I don't really care what like anyone thinks, but I like to put care in how the lyrics are told. So, I want the lyrics to kind of be centered around me myself, you know, this is what I'm going through. And I wouldn't want the listener to kind of, I want it to be very deliberate, and kind of like the imagery that is being used, because sometimes my imagery can be very graphic. And I make sure I take a lot of care in that because I don't want to be violent for the sake of being violent. I don't want to be traumatic for the sake of being traumatic. I wanted to have purpose behind that. And I like to make sure that this kind of knows that if there's anything that even reaches that level, I want them to understand that these experience that I'm describing right now is centered around what I went through, and it's not just put in there for the purpose of shock value. And when I was coming up, God has nothing, I never done like anything like it. And one of the things that I was thinking I was like, shit, should I just like, put like a huge trigger warning, like at the beginning of the album, but it's like, that kind of takes you out of the listening experience. So I think I've just made it clear that this is my usual content. And sometimes I see people recommend this album, my albums. And I think that's what they usually say the same, you know, it's not an easy listen. And that is true, it's not that easy, if you are sensitive to like the more graphic stuff, and especially if you don't live in the world that I'm describing. But when it comes to like technicalities, I really don't care if you know this, and I hated 808. And that important one, so that doesn't really bother me.

Amanda

That's totally fair. And I appreciate that very much. You're doing the music for you to an extent. And so I love that. But also I can hear you know, in you describing your process, and in listening to your music, that there is a lot of care and deliberate attention put into all of the lyrical content and the beats themselves. So as a listener, I really appreciate that. I'm wondering if you know, the kind of audience response from our to your work has given you any insight into the healing power of expressing anger?

Ashanti

Yeah, I guess it's just, when you're going through those extreme of emotions, it's nice to have someone who can relate and having people relate to the topics that are in the work is eye opening, because some of them are like, I just put this long when I'm like, really angry, and I want to I want to feel like fuck you to the world. And that, to me is really awesome, because it's set up what it was supposed to do. And I think there's there's healing in that.

Amanda

Do you feel surprised at all? Knowing that others really identify with the kind of anger that is expressed?

Yeah, it's, it's shocking, because to me, this experience is a very concentrated to my feelings of my expressions at different parts in my life. And before this, I felt as if I lived a very unique existence. But, you know, that couldn't be further from the truth, this existence that a lot of people have had to deal with. And it's reassuring that we're not really alone in this fight.

Amanda

So would you say that the process of like performing has allowed you to connect with a community that maybe you otherwise wouldn't have found?

Ashanti

Yeah, it's even less about them communicating with me and more about me connecting and communicating with them. So I think, the connection, I guess, from my personal standpoint, you know, goes back to that question of Does anyone care and dislike Yeah, they do care and they've gone through a similar stuff. Totally.

Amanda

And right now, what are you working on? If anything? Oh, yeah, if you're comfortable sharing that, yeah.

Ashanti

I can't I can't really like go into specifics, but no worries. I got really into like melody in my last like, project as weird as that sounds, because music is Melody. I guess that could be debated as well. But I got really into like, just the melodic aspect. And I wanted to explore that further. So I'll be doing God willing, I'll be doing some soundtrack II stuff.

Amanda

Cool. Can't wait to hear more about that. Or listen. I just have one kind of final question that we're asking to everyone who's included in the podcast and you can kind of speak to this in whatever way you wish but in sound, what do you feel is hidden and what do you feel is revealed?

Ashanti

So in sound, what is hidden and what is revealed? I think in sound what is hidden is hopelessness. And what is revealed is survival. That's how I can put it: hidden hopelessness revealed survival.

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