

Saul Williams Interview

with DJ Matt Werner on Fresh Air: The Alternative

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Transcript by Korin McGinty, edited by DJ Matt Werner

DJ MATT WERNER: Saul, I was wondering if you could come on the line now and discuss a little bit about your latest album *Niggy Tardust*.

SAUL WILLIAMS: Sure, well the name of the album is *The Inevitable Rise and Liberation of Niggy Tardust!* And it's a concept album where I am essentially exploring the idea and reality of liberation, of freedom, and what it means in the face of, or under the context of our existing definition of race, and how that relates to music and identity, and what have you.

It's essentially a very danceable dialogue, you know, self-exploration, and the need to step beyond the boundaries imposed by society as far as what people come to expect of someone when they assume that they're from a particular place or look a particular way or talk a particular way, or what have you. So yeah it's basically me finding the freedom to just break out of my shell and make the music that I want to make regardless of the executive who says, "Well this doesn't actually fit the formulaic mold of what we're expecting from you, of what we would need in order to get this to these people over here." It's about just breaking those boundaries.

DJ MATT WERNER: How was it collaborating with Trent Reznor on the album?

SAUL WILLIAMS: Working with Trent was great. Trent was someone who never stood in the way of any of my creative ideas on anything. And everything that I brought to the table, he'd be beaming with excitement about and basically just helped me facilitate getting those ideas executed in ways that really translated for the listener. So he was extremely helpful.

DJ MATT WERNER: So the first track we're going to play is your single *Black Stacey*, and I was wondering if you could introduce the track and talk a little bit about how you came to write it. I'm curious as to how autobiographical the track is.

SAUL WILLIAMS: Right. Well firstly *Black Stacey* is not from *Niggy Tardust*. *Black Stacey* is from the album before *Niggy Tardust* which is called *Saul Williams*. Although it's related to *Niggy Tardust* in that, that's the beginning of me wanting to break free of the constraints of race, or the paradigm of race, what have you. So my middle name is Stacey and the song is about simply learning to be comfortable in your own skin and that's it. I think that's all you need to know.

DJ MATT WERNER: So this is *Black Stacey* by Saul Williams.

[*Black Stacey plays*]

DJ MATT WERNER: You were just listening to *Black Stacey* by Saul Williams. And here at Fresh Air, on DJ Matt Werner's show we're very privileged to have Saul Williams on a pre-recorded phone interview. Saul, the next track we're going to play is the cover you did of U2's *Sunday Bloody Sunday* and I'm curious, do you know, has U2 listened to it? Have you heard what their feedback is on it?

SAUL WILLIAMS: I know that Bono has heard it, and I know he liked it enough to let us put it out. [laughs]. Yes, I know that he's heard it. Aside from that, my reason for doing this song was simply because I grew up listening to it and always related to it as if it was about I guess the struggle that was happening in the United States with African-Americans. I was not as informed about what was happening in Ireland at the time when I first heard the song. And when I learned about it, it just confirmed my perspective of struggle. And being [in a] struggle, regardless of where you face it, how you face it, people that go through some sort of institutionalized oppression or suppression can oftentimes relate to one another, and so I've often related to a lot of the music coming out of Ireland for whatever reasons, and this song is a prime example of that. I chose to cover it on *Niggy Tardust* just cuz I love it.

DJ MATT WERNER: And I think it is an incredible cover of *Sunday Bloody Sunday*. You're about to listen to Saul Williams only on Fresh Air.

[*Sunday Bloody Sunday* plays]

DJ MATT WERNER: You were just listening to *Sunday Bloody Sunday* the cover by Saul Williams and that is on his latest album *The Inevitable Rise and Liberation of NiggyTardust!* And the way you disseminated this album was quite unique through an online method. It was very non-traditional, similar to how Radiohead disseminated their album. I was wondering if you could describe how you came to release it how you did.

SAUL WILLIAMS: Well yeah, we actually released our album about 10 days after Radiohead released their album. And so it was an idea that friends and I had had very close to the same time that Radiohead had had, when we simply realized that there was a window that was open in the industry and in our ability to be able to reach our fan base at this time without the aid of a label initially. So we decided to just essentially offer it for a very cheap price as a download. We gave people the option of paying for it, or not. So they could pay it—they could get it for free or they could pay 5 dollars and choose the quality of the download that they wanted. We were also able to include artwork and lyrics in their download. And all that led up to our physical release, which we did with *The Fader Magazine* and Label and yeah it's worked perfectly for us it's really gone well as far as the number of people we reached as the result of 1) Of course being able to offer it for free, 2) Being able to offer it at an inexpensive price, so that people who heard of the project and said, "Hmm, I think I want to try it out," didn't really have much difficulty in saying, "Ah, you know, I'll spend the price of a soy latte to listen to this album." It really works in our favor.

DJ MATT WERNER: And it's been very popular indeed and if people want to download this album what website should they visit?

SAUL WILLIAMS: Well that's the thing, once we made it commercially available in stores, and what have you, now it's available in two places: in stores and on iTunes or Amazon or something like that. So now it's at the official downloading places. We spent the first not year, but the first 8 months away from those avenues so that we could do it our own way, but now we're in the mainstream retail places, so iTunes would probably be the best place to go or a store.

DJ MATT WERNER: So for my next question for you, I'm going to go back a little ways. Back to your *Amethyst Rock Star* album, and I'm going to play the end of your track *Wine*, and it's one of my favorite poems of yours. And I'm going to shift focus a little bit because I'm a literature student. I'm working on my Master's in English literature here at the University of Edinburgh where we broadcast Fresh Air, and one thing I'm fascinated about this song is the line, "We put language in zoos to observe caged thought and toss peanuts and pea-funk at intellect," and I've always been curious as to what that means or what you were intending behind the meaning, because I've taken my own interpretation from it, but I'm curious what your take is.

SAUL WILLIAMS: Lao Tzu says, "The Tao that can be told can is not the eternal Tao." And as someone who writes poetry it's often been important to me to keep words *themselves* in perspective, to realize that although I may find myself capable of

expressing an idea or a sentiment, that many of the greatest ideas or sentiments are very difficult, if not impossible to put into words. And that intellect itself—and it's funny because poetry I would argue is not necessarily an intellectual art form it's an intuitive art form, but because it uses words in the way that it does it's usually admired by people who have some strong identification with the intellectual process. However I think that often it's the intellect [that] can get in the way of understanding the poem or understanding love or the simplest most compassionate aspects of reality. It's not your intellectual prowess that makes you say, "I don't want to harm animals," it's your compassion. And so in many ways I believe that intellect is put up with not necessarily as high as a standard as many would place upon it. And so the poem says "we put language in zoos to observe caged thought." It's simply a way of saying that we must keep language and cleverness in perspective and realize that there's something beyond that. There's something intrinsically linked to our soul, and that linkage is beyond words, and that's the goal of life, of art, of music and of poetry and of being itself.

DJ MATT WERNER: So you are about to listen to the end of *Wine* by Saul Williams off of his *Amethyst Rock Star* album.

[*Wine plays*]

DJ MATT WERNER: Saul Williams, to continue with this discussion—I don't mean to get too academic with it—but I really enjoy studying literature, and some of what you're saying reminds me of this text I've been reading this semester: it's Jacques Derrida's *Of*

Grammatology, and it's about this whole notion of deconstructing language. One thing that I think a lot of your poetry gets at is how words lack the ability to express the nature of true reality. In your track *Release*, you have some amazing lines like, "These words are not tools of communication, they are shards of metal dropped from eight-story windows." And then you also talk about "There isn't a mantra to fill my being in those moments," and a lot of that it seems to connect back with even your early writing like the poem you wrote:

they say
that i am a poet
i wonder what they would say
if they saw me
from the inside
i bottle
emotions
and place them
into the sea
for others
to unbottle
on distant shores
i am unsure
as to whether
they ever reach
and for that matter

as to whether
i ever get
my point
across
or my love

And it seems like in the decade I've been following your work, there's this sort of struggle between reconciling language with how reality presents itself.

SAUL WILLIAMS: Yes, I think you have voiced it perfectly. There has been this struggle, although it's not something that I seem to ponder too much nowadays. I think that being able to clearly articulate a thought, a feeling, an idea is possible. I believe that it's possible. But within that, I think that there's also a need to raise one's ability to confront a topic, an issue, whether gracefully or ungracefully, but I think in that attempt to articulate something, there has to be a strong enough desire to want to articulate it because some things—well they say some things are left better unsaid—but truly I think there's some things that we may be afraid of saying because of their resonant power, and so there are things that I've dodged and things that I haven't wanted to say or haven't felt ready to embody them or to hear them aloud, or what have you. But yeah, it's certainly been a journey and that journey has included that struggle with wrestling with the [*Saul gives a long exhale*], just the ability of words, as you put it, to express truly what's being felt. [*pause*] But I think that dance itself is poetry, you know?

DJ MATT WERNER: And in addition to your playing with language and your infusing with many different sort of linguistic and poetic traditions, another thing I've noticed is your interpretation and playing with many different religious and spiritual traditions. Just this summer I had the opportunity to collaborate with a Persian scholar on translating Rumi's *Book of the Sun*. And in it there's a lot of pantheistic Sufi philosophy and collaborating with this Persian scholar, a lot of the ideas that we were talking about in Rumi's work, I'd first encountered actually in your work, like when off that track *Wine* you say "All words and worlds are metaphors of me." And I'm curious as to what different religious influences you've had, because I know your father's a preacher.

SAUL WILLIAMS: Well you know, *that's* really been where my interest has really gravitated towards over the years. It's in investigating all these different religions and what have you. As you put, I was raised Christian. My father was a Baptist minister. He pastored a Baptist church, and with time, and when I was a teenager I began questioning that religion. Not really the teachings of Jesus at all, but just the institution surrounding that and those teachings, and realized that institution itself seemed at odds with what I felt in my gut. And when I started exploring a lot of more esoteric Christianity and teachings surrounding that, and then I started studying its roots in Judaism and Egyptology and then of course being exposed also to a lot of Middle Eastern writers, and what have you.

Well one, like Rumi and Hafiz and so the Sufi writers—which is like an esoteric brand of Mohammadism, so to speak—really became influential. And then of course Hinduism and Buddhism, the Vedas, and all of those things. I've definitely traveled in terms of

wanting to grasp and experience other people's expression of connection to spirit. It's all been of interest to me. I think all of these religions have really grasped at articulating something clearly for man to be able to identify with his spirit and express that and enhance that with time, and that's been important to me, and interesting.

DJ MATT WERNER: In exploring these different esoteric religious and spiritual traditions, I found there seems to be some parallels between your poetry and that of William Butler Yeats like with his poem *The Second Coming* and also Walt Whitman as well, in the listing in some of your tracks like *Release* and *Coded Language*, those seem to very much have that Whitmanian quality to them.

SAUL WILLIAMS: Well Whitman is definitely very influential, and I've definitely read some Yeats as well. And these older poets have definitely opened a door for me to, [*Saul gives a long exhale*] I guess, to step beyond. And they have like me I think there is this thing that's being so deeply entrenched in this Christian society and seeing something deep within it and something well beyond it as well, and wanting to explore and using words to do that and realizing that the writing itself and the reading of the writing in my case often is a form of ritual. So that I look at much of my writing as a form of incantation. Or I'm aiming to essentially call on or release a certain amount of energy, of power through the recitation of this piece. And so quite simply I guess sometimes I go there in the writing in trying to crack open the vortex. I think Whitman for example is someone who's kept that really in perspective and kept very grounded in his perspective,

and I really admire him for that. Whereas Yeats seemed to be a lot more embedded in the same thing that I have to fight against sometimes, which is that Christian upbringing.

DJ MATT WERNER: The final track I'm going to play is *Twice the First Time*, which has the reference to the *Sha-Clack-Clack* poem that was famous in the movie *Slam*. And so we've covered a little bit about your linguistic and religious explorations, but I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the racial dimensions of your poetry, and also how that connects with Barack Obama's election. Because I know you released recently a track right before the election on telling people to get out and vote, but it was done quite in a unique style.

SAUL WILLIAMS: Yeah, being born in this nation, I think that it's been implicit that change is coming, and what have you, but at the same time there's been a consistent need to express for many that we are so much more than how we are perceived. And you know that poem *Sha-Clack-Clack* is about that, it's about realizing we're so much more than the history that's been taught us about ourselves, and I think it's been necessary to crack that shell for people to begin to think outside of the box and imagine what sort of future or present is possible. And I think Barack Obama symbolizes that perfectly.

My latest album's called *Niggy Tardust*, and I supply him as a hybrid, as somebody that embodies the best of many worlds. And in the same way, I think that's what Barack Obama symbolizes, this sort of hybrid sensibility, and that people from many walks of life can see themselves reflected through him. And that is something that you know, not

only in our art, but in our being and realizing that standing under the banner of race or nationality as if we are simply one thing, is a limiting approach to reality. And this poem is one of my early ways of beginning that quest of expression and shift in perspective. I wrote *Sha-Clack-Clack* in 1996, the song [*Twice the First Time*] came out in 1997, I believe, *Slam* came out in 1998, and here we are now.

DJ MATT WERNER: Saul, thank you so much for your time. You have been listening to DJ Matt Werner's exclusive interview with Saul Williams it was recorded over the phone on November 21, 2008.

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