



Photograph by Rondo Estrello ©2018

IN CONVERSATION: ERYKAH BADU

By David Marchese
Photographs by Rondo Estrello

The R&B star on Jedi mind tricks, how millennials hear music, and not taking rappers to the sunken place.

"I'M GATHERING IDEAS," SAYS ERYKAH BADU, TALKING OVER DINNER AT A VEGAN RESTAURANT IN MIDTOWN MANHATTAN. "I'M UPLOADING."

Badu, in a baggy sweater, oversized eyeglasses, and giant fedora, is talking about why she hasn't released an album of new material since 2010's *New Amerykah Part Two* — and why she isn't particularly concerned about it. "I'll download new ideas at some point."

Her old ones are still making the rounds: The R&B singer's debut album, 1997's *Baduizm*, is tentatively slated for reissue as a set of vinyl 45s in February, and she performs live around the world eight months out of every year. And anyway, it's what she might do with the other four months that's most interesting to her lately. "I want to have a variety show," she muses. "I want to get my midwifery certification in direct-entry midwifery. I want to build schools. I want to join the Peace Corps. I want to paint more seriously. I want to help my children with their dreams." But for now, she's "happy to be here talking with you in the present." She gives a knowing smile. "Because that's all there is."

You're one of the rare musicians who manages to stay relevant with listeners younger than themselves. How much of that is because you're good on social media?

If it's anything, it's that I understand where young people are coming from. I don't try and fight it. What's interesting to me about music and the younger generation is that what we hear on the radio is more about frequency and sound than words. People talk about "mumble," but that's because they don't understand that the important thing is the vibra-

tion, not the words. The kids need vibrations, because their attention span is about three seconds.

Does that mean lyrics are less important than they used to be?
I think so.

So what accounts for the success of someone like Kendrick Lamar?
You named a hip-hop artist and hip-hop is the people. Hip-hop is not separate from the people. It goes to where the people go, and part of what moves people is vibration. People pray for that kind of movement, they pray for a Kendrick. Kendrick getting his thoughts out plays a big role in other people's thoughts. That thinking becomes a collective thing, something that comes out of a need, and that exchange is a vibration, too.

How has hip-hop changed in the two decades since *Baduizm*?
As much as the people have changed. We're in such a different place. My son, Seven, is 19. I'm seeing him evolve into this creature that I never thought I could create. Without even trying, he's an improvement on his father's design. His thinking. His logic. His compassion. It's an evolutionary cycle. People acted out in new ways when rock and roll first came out, and the blues, and bebop. Here's how I think of it: My favorite cartoon is *The Flintstones*. It's the funniest thing to me. But when my children are sitting with me trying to watch it, the whole frequency is too slow for them. Everything has sped up and recalibrated; the children are vibrating faster. They're way ahead of us. That's how hip-hop has changed.

Is anything being lost in how younger people absorb music?
You can't roll a joint on the cover of a digital download.



Photograph by Rondo Estrello ©2018

I was listening to the interview you did recently with Joe Budden, and he brought up the recurring cartoonish image of you as this sort of quasi-mystical sorceress who's always playing mind games with rappers. The Erykah Badu legend.

Is it frustrating to have that kind of legend follow you around? It seems pretty clearly rooted in a kind of sexism.

I take advantage of it. It's a good thing if people think I'm supposed to be some mystical creature that controls people's minds.

How do you take advantage of it?

I keep the prestige going. I keep up the idea that I'm mystical. The thing about this legend is, I get blamed if rappers do good or do bad — people think these rappers get all confused by my presence.

Can you characterize that presence?

That I take rappers to the sunken place. I don't think that's what I do. I hope it's not.

Is positive projection just as silly to you as that kind of negative projection? Your fans often talk about you online as if you're something closer to a magical unicorn rather than a living, breathing human being.

It's all part of the same thing. In both ways — whether it comes from men or women — some people talk about me like I'm a sex goddess, a

magical creature, a unicorn. Those things are part of how people perceive me. I never think of it as derogatory. Even when there is an element of sexism to it I find it all hilarious. It means you're powerful — in a loving way.

It's been eight and ten years since your last two studio albums, which were both fairly political. Now we're here, in this political moment. Are you feeling at all inspired to make new music?

You know what's funny? I'm thinking about music, but it's all about tuning forks, singing bowls, bells, drums. I went to South Africa and recorded drums from Soweto, from Johannesburg, just gathering sounds. That's what I'm interested in right now — sound vibration. If I put out another project, it'll be like that. Maybe I'm humming or primal wailing or tribal moaning. You know, I haven't written anything in five years.

You mean no new proper songs? You did put out that mixtape a couple years back.

That's right. If I'm not inspired to write, I don't. Whether it's me as a singer or a dancer or a writer or a painter or a filmmaker or on Instagram or a mixtape, everything I do is coming out of a real need. I think Joni Mitchell is the one who said that singing, laughing, and crying come up out of the

same need: to get stuff out. I just haven't had anything to say. I can't really force it. If I did, what I'd be saying wouldn't be coming from an honest place. Or maybe I've said all the things I feel like saying.

What about performing live? Have your feelings about that changed?

They haven't. I feel the most like me when I perform. That's why I do it so much — never had a vacation. No matter what's going on in my life or the world, performing feels new every time, and I can get to where I need to be to have a good show every single night.

Where do you need to be?

It's about becoming a living, breathing organism with the people. And it always happens. I never have a bad show.

Just as a selfish fan, it's hard not to wonder about what music someone like D'Angelo could've been making all those years he was away.

Life happens. Shit happens. Family members die. Your relationship gets fucked up. Your record label does some shit. Lauryn has six children. There are so many different circumstances why someone might not make music. It is selfish of you to want more from those people, and that's fine. Everybody has their own shit.

What's your shit?

I don't have no shit right now, and I'm so fucking happy about it. I don't have a lot of needs, so maybe that's why I don't have any shit.

What's Baduizm?

The way I see things.

Photograph by Rondo Estrello ©2018



"IT'S ABOUT BECOMING A LIVING, BREATHING ORGANISM WITH THE PEOPLE. AND IT ALWAYS HAPPENS. I NEVER HAVE A BAD SHOW."

Does Baduizm now mean the same thing as it did when Baduizm came out 20 years ago?

I've learned so many things since then. I've changed in a way that involves elimination for the sake of evolution. There's less emphasis on trying to figure things out. It's about letting things be. I'm focusing on listening to the silence underneath everything. That's what I try to connect with. I can listen to the silence right here, right now while we're talking, and it feels so good. I'm in love with the silence.

I've read you describe yourself as a "spiritual" person. What does that mean to you?

I lead with my emotions, my feelings, and my thoughts — I like to describe that as spirit. When I'm meeting people, it's about the spirit first. I think in the Hindu religion it's called Namaste: the divine in me recognizes the divine in you. No matter what our background was or what we were programmed to think or what our egos want us to believe about each other, there's something about looking in someone's eyes and connecting with them, their struggle, their whole shit — that's what I want to do. That's spiritual to me.

You're your own manager, which is extremely rare for a musician at your level. Wouldn't it be easier to have someone else dealing with the business side?

I've never had a manager, and it's so I could be as lazy as I want and procrastinate whenever I want. I also want to be able to live outside of the music business. If I want to take off a year and raise my child, or pace myself in some other way, I can do it without having to explain it to anyone. And I've been blessed with organizational skills. I'm always late, though.

What's something you're still learning to do?

You can build a whole fucking world on the shit I don't know. I used to want to appear like I knew everything, and now my favorite answer to give is "I don't know." I just love to say, "I don't know." It makes life a whole lot easier.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*

A version of this article appears in the February 5, 2018, issue of New York Magazine.