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A Podcast with Paul Tshuma – Musician/Composer/Producer (Transcript)
Balado avec Paul Tshuma, musicien/compositeur/producteur (Transcription)

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Abstract

Montreal-based musician, composer, and music producer Paul Tshuma talks about his career and his musical process with special issue editors Ash McAskill and Samuel Thulin. Tshuma was one of the two opening keynote speakers for the VIBE symposium. Tshuma edited the audio interview/podcast included in this issue of the CJDS [\[link\]](#). The transcript of the interview, conducted on 8 April 2019, is included here.

Résumé

Le musicien, compositeur et producteur de musique montréalais Paul Tshuma parle de sa carrière et de son processus musical avec le rédacteur et la rédactrice en chef de ce numéro spécial, Ash McAskill et Samuel Thulin. Paul Tshuma était l'un des deux conférencier·es invité·e du symposium VIBE. Il a édité l'entrevue audio/balado incluse dans ce numéro de la revue [\[lien\]](#). La transcription de l'entrevue, réalisée le 8 avril 2019, est présentée ici.

Key Words: Music, Technology, Disability, Accessibility

00:00

ASH: My name is Ash McAskill. Welcome to this special podcast where we are interviewing the amazing local, Montreal-based musician, producer, and all-around great guy, Paul Tshuma. I am one of the co-editors of this special issue of the Canadian Journal of Disability Studies. It's part

of our special issue called VIBE. I am a current PhD candidate in Communication Studies at Concordia University.

00:34

SAM: Well, I'll just briefly say I'm Sam Thulin. I'm also one of the co-editors of this special issue of the journal. And I've been doing my postdoc at Concordia, working on the VIBE project.

00:48

PAUL: Well, yeah, I'm Paul, the one that you've heard Ash and Sam talk about, probably for a number of times.

00:58

ASH: So just for those of you that are listening, we'll quickly give a little description of what we're wearing today so people maybe can give us some visuality. I am wearing a very sporty look, today. I have black and white running shoes that I normally don't wear, blue jeans, and a really comfy blue striped shirt with my hair up in a top bun. And I have purple glasses on.

SAM: I'm wearing a grey sweater and some light blue jeans, some black hiking shoes, and I just got a haircut so my hair is not as long as usual. And I haven't shaved in a while so my beard is longer than usual.

01:39

PAUL: And I'm wearing a black jacket with gray inside and a yellow t-shirt. And I'm wearing grey jogging pants. And white and black Nike shoes. Short hair, grey glasses.

01:57

ASH: So basically, this podcast is an extension from VIBE, which was an international Deaf and disability arts symposium that was held at Concordia University, just at the beginning of December. And Paul was so great to be one of our keynotes on our first night. So maybe Paul, you can talk about your experience of VIBE and that night?

02:28

PAUL: Yeah, thank you. It was a great honour for me to be invited as a keynote speaker at VIBE. And also to share my experience in the arts. For example, my topic was music in the hands of a disabled person. And I am really honoured that I was able to share that part of my life as a musician, producer, and music arranger, singer, vocal trainer.

03:03

ASH: So Paul, can you tell us more about yourself and how you came into music producing?

03:10

PAUL: Well, I always loved music as a kid, when I was three years old, and I used to sing, used to listen to the radio. A few years later, I came to Concordia, because I realized this is what I love to do. And I realized why I wanted to do it, because the reason was to be able to tell my life

story through music and express myself, and also to show people that regardless of your limitations, you can make it in life and you can do anything you want.

03:45

ASH: So maybe, can you walk us through that process of understanding, when you start a piece what are you thinking? What are the tools that you're using to archive some of those thoughts?

03:58

PAUL: Yeah, um, basically, when I come up with a piece, it first starts off with a melody or with a beat that I'm hearing. Usually, what really gets me going is the bassline. I love bass. If I could ever play, bass would be my instrument and followed by the saxophone. Once I lay down my bassline, I know that everything will come together and start laying down the drums and all the other instruments. So that doesn't only happen through one software, MachFive [virtual instrument software] that has like all instruments.

04:35

SAM: Okay, that's a super interesting process. Just to kind of like, go a little bit deeper into that process. So what you're saying is that you would hear a baseline in your head for instance? Then you would sing it into a software that converts your melody into MIDI, which is kind of a computer interface for notes that once they're in MIDI, you can use that MIDI file to play it through any instrument that you would choose from your sample base. Would you then pick different instruments to see which one you preferred that melody to sound in?

05:24

PAUL: That's what would happen. It was a long process because, I would sing in my bassline, for example. I would come up with like [hums a syncopated bassline]. I would sing just the bass. But in my head, I'm hearing the drums [hums the same bassline with more percussive elements]. So once it's done, I'll go into a software called Melodyne for pitch correction. And that's where I did all the pitch correction and the cleaning. That saved me a lot of time, at that time, so then I would export it from WAV after it's clean, it's just the WAV, and then I export it as a MIDI, and then import it back to Digital Performer [Digital Audio Workstation/Sequencer software]. And then open the sample software and then I start picking the bass guitar that I'm hearing in my head. If I don't get what I want, I would just like mix three different kinds of bass instruments, and then it gives me that kind of an oomph, or whatever feel that I want to feel from that bass that's playing in my head.

06:30

SAM: That's great. And then would you do that for all the instruments? You might go to drums next?

06:34

PAUL: Yeah, then I would go into drums, each feel of a bass drum.

06:39

ASH: Maybe this is a good time, we've got a piece that Paul is currently working on called, “I need your touch, Lord”. And maybe we can listen to a little snippet and you can talk about the piece.

[MUSIC PLAYS: Bass, Drums, Organ and Acoustic Guitar in an intricate, slow, hopeful/rejoicing composition]

07:40

[MUSIC FADES TO BACKGROUND AND CONTINUES TO PLAY]

07:46

SAM: That's great.

07:47

ASH: So we just listened to a little bit of a piece that Paul produced called, “I need your touch, Lord”. Paul, can you maybe tell us a little bit about this specific one that we just listened to?

08:01

PAUL: Basically, I learned this song back in Zimbabwe many years ago. It's a chorus actually, not a song. But then it kind of faded out of mind, after many years. And then three years ago, I was on YouTube just listening to a bunch of songs and stuff, and I heard this song being played by another choir, and I was like “woah, I remember this song”. Then this idea came, I'm like, ok, I'm gonna do my own arrangement and with my own chords/feel to it, you know. And I went,

and at this time, I had already gotten a transcribing software, Sibelius, and that changed the whole thing. So remember, upgrade from Digital Performer - using 3 to 5 software just to get one instrument - to Sibelius where I just like click and drag a note. It's still time-consuming, but it saves.

[MUSIC IN BACKGROUND FADES OUT COMPLETELY]

09:02

ASH: I'm wondering, as you were talking, and you were explaining to Sam - Sam is also a sound artist so I think it's really interesting hearing kind of the talk between the two of you and learning more because I'm learning more - I was thinking about, like, "how did Paul learn this model of music-making?" Because I'm sure when you were at Concordia, they have a certain idea of what a musician looks like and how they move. And certainly that does not include many different types of diverse bodies and cognitive styles. I'm wondering, was there someone or an artist that you were really, like you were modeling from if it was like another disabled artist, or a music style that really like gave you a model to think about how to make music from *your* body?

09:53

PAUL: Well, making music from my body, I wouldn't say I was modeling somebody. It's just figuring out ways. I want to play a bass guitar, but I can't, so what other ways can I make myself sound like a bass guitar? So it was like, okay, I will use my mouth and my mouth would just do the rest. Like I would just arrange my music through that, you know. And basically, what really pushed me even further is Stevie Wonder, who will always be my role model wherever I go. It's

like, he's amazing and a very good role model if you want to become a musician with a disability. It doesn't matter what kind of a disability you have. But Stevie Wonder, is the one that showed me that, you know what, your can do it, the sky's the limit. It's up to what and how you wanna live your life.

10:56

SAM: I know that you co-founded the United Tribulation Choir. And I'm really interested in your thoughts on collaborating with other musicians as well.

11:08

PAUL: Yeah, as a founder of United Tribulation Choir, was groundbreaking a dream for my brother and I because what we discovered was that like, by having this choir, it would really help us tell our stories. And that's why we called the choir the United Tribulation Choir, because we wanted it to be a choir open for people who want to be part of it, because everybody goes through challenges, everybody has a story to tell. So we wanted everybody to be able to share their story, in any shape or form - whether you're musician, you're sharing a story by the way you play your instrument, whether you're a singer. And this came about when we had been doing a lot of collaborations with different soloists, one of them, who really we did a lot of collaborations together for about three to four years. And his name is Jams and we really did a lot of concerts together before we started United Tribulation Choir.

12:11

ASH: I think it's really interesting to think about where music making and the industry is going, especially with artists such as yourself. And an artist named Gaelynn Lea who is in the States, she fiddles and has made some beautiful music. Where do you think those intersections of disability, technology, and music-making are going? Where do you think it's going? Or where do you hope it goes?

12:40

PAUL: I think we're headed in a very good direction, going into a place where, as time goes on, people with disabilities will have full control of music, will arrange music fully on their own. When I tell people that I'm a musician and a composer, the first question in their mind is like “so what instrument do you play?” But already, in their mind it’s like, “oh, okay, he's a musician? How can he play an instrument?” Then I have to like, “Oh, I'm a singer, and a composer”. Then the next question is like, “how do you arrange music?”, especially those that are musically inclined. But those that are not, they’ll be like “OK... that’s cool...”

13:28

ASH: Maybe one last question. I wonder, there's probably so many people, especially people that are disabled, that have a physical disability, that want to make music, but don't know where to begin because of so many inaccessibilities of maybe of the university they're at because they don't have the same supportive network that you did at Concordia, which is so great to hear by the way. What is your advice to people that are facing those barriers and challenges? And what tools do you think they would need to start exploring those musical interests and pursuits? What would you... What would be your advice?

14:10

PAUL: My advice to people, especially with a disability, if you have the desire and this is your passion, go with your dream, figure out a way without any technology around you. If you didn't have technology and you were left in an undeveloped country, how would *you* make music? How would you be able to express yourself musically? Once you discover what you can do with what you have around you, then your next step will be connecting with different people, talking to people about your passion, because if you don't talk people never know what you want. Think of how far you want to take your music and what you would want for you to do what you want to do. If you want to be a singer, you look for that tool that's going to help you be a singer. Basically, that's what my friend Gilles told me when I started a studio. For those without disability, be open to ask questions. I know, like, people tend to shy away. And I experienced that a lot. You would rather be open and talk to the person. And if they're not comfortable, just ask them, “are you comfortable with me asking questions or not?” Because, yes, for sure everybody's entitled if they're want or not to be asked questions, but the first step for you is to approach the person, talk to them, and then build that relationship.

15:50

ASH: Paul, is there anything else you wanted to share? Maybe where to find maybe your music or other projects that you're working on?

15:58

PAUL: Well, what I would like to leave, which I think would be important for people with disabilities that are interested in doing music, or becoming a musician, arranging, directing and stuff, I'll say, well, you can reach me at paul.tshuma@yahoo.ca. I'll also give you different software names that you can check out and then you can see what works for you.