

Introduction: Hi, my name is Byrd McDaniel, and I'm a postdoctoral fellow in the Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry. I joined in 2020 and my postdoc will conclude in 2021, sadly, but I love being here at Emory. I have a PhD in music, and also a background. I have a master's degree in musicology and another master's degree in American Studies. And I'm here researching digital cultures, disability, and music technologies.

Question 1: Can you tell us a little bit about your journey (and where your headspace was at) from graduation to your current role?

Response: I had a relatively meandering journey to find my place as a postdoctoral fellow researching music and technology. As an undergraduate at a small liberal arts college, I majored in English and Chinese. I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I knew that I was interested in language and culture, and graduated and really searched for how to transform that into a career. And I felt like it was difficult for me to imagine what my pathway might be because I felt like a lot of my peers had very clear trajectories—they either wanted to go in business, or they wanted to become doctors, or they knew that that nonprofit would be the perfect job for them. But I didn't really have that. And so I was sort of grasping what to do with my interests. And I wanted to find a way to leverage my skills and abilities to help people. But it was very vague at that point in time. So I eventually pursued a master's degree in American Studies at the University of Alabama. And that was in 2013. And it started in 2011 to 2013. And I basically became really interested in the intersection of music and popular culture. And so I was able to kind of build on some of my interests, broadly speaking, and research all kinds of histories in the US related to race, gender, sexuality. And I grew as a person in that process, too, and developed professional goals. And that led me to want to study contemporary music communities. And that's what led me to pursue a PhD in music at Brown University. And so I did, and that took a long time, it took six years. And then I was a professor at Northeastern University, and then I came to Emory. So it's been a long journey. But in the course of getting my PhD, as it should, in popular culture, and music, generally speaking, but particularly areas that no one else was researching, and that happened to be digital cultures. And so I felt like that was a particularly rare topic at the time, although in the future I think that would be a very common topic. And particularly listening, and people with disabilities, disabled performers, disabled musicians, and disabled listeners, who I felt like were important and had important perspectives and were often kind of left out of broader social justice initiatives. And I really wanted them to be included and think about disability as a critical part of racial justice, gender, sexuality, class. So these other struggles are deeply interconnected with disability. And I really wanted to build a career kind of advancing the connections between those intersectional identities. So that's what led me to research the things that I do. And I'm not sure where my career will go from here. I think that there's a myth that you achieve some sort of goal or job and then you're done. And you kind of like, sit there forever. But in fact, I think in the current climate, you constantly kind of reinvent yourself and creatively adapt to your current situation. And so that's what I'm doing. But I'm fortunate to have transformed that desire to study art and culture into a career path where I research digital communities and people with disabilities.

Question 2: What does creativity and living a creative life mean to you?

Response: I think some people maybe are born with an innate desire to create things or at least they find it in a very young age. And they want to create art or create plays, maybe you're a little kid or something and you want to do a finger painting that you show your parents or something like that. And that evolves into a kind of broader desire to kind of share with the world. I think other people may learn it later in life. And they kind of discovered a latent desire to be creative. And whether the desire comes early or late, I also think it's something you have to kind of nurture, and you have to kind of craft into something that can be part of your career. And so you might have that desire to be creative, to create things, but struggle to find an outlet for that. And to know what to do with that. Should that be part of your job? Or is that your hobby after your job is over? And I think for me, I knew it was a big enough part of me, it had to be part of my job in some way. I couldn't have a job that was not creative in any respect. But no job is wholly creative. Or in other words, some jobs have creative components that are not rewarding. And some have other components that are infinitely rewarding. And so like, as a teacher, I've taught classes at many different schools. And teaching is very creative in the sense that you give lectures, and you get to craft assignments, and syllabi, and you get to read and then tell people that they have to read these things because they're so good, they need to learn from these authors. But there are also parts of teaching that are just kind of boring, like dealing with Excel spreadsheets and putting together grades or something and that's not why I became a teacher. That's not inherently fun. But I think that a good way to combine the kind of boring and creative aspects of the job is to find a way that they can kind of come into a good balance for you. And when you're creating the kinds of things that are rewarding, and that are sustaining, you could do for a long period of time. And those may change and your job may change and that's fine. So for me a creative life is that I get to persuade people to look at things more deeply than they might have initially seen them. That's what I tried to do with my research. Publishing academic articles is a version of that. Publishing a book is a version of that. And publishing in popular press, like writing for journalistic sites online, that's part of that too. And all of those are an extension of my desire to kind of persuade people to think deeply about American popular culture. And so that's a creative life to me. But I'm also friends with artists who would look at me and be like *you live such an uncreative boring life, we create sound art every day and you're sitting there in front of a computer, you're so boring*. And fair enough. But I think you've got to find the creativity that speaks to you, and the kinds of things that you want to generate, because that will sustain you. And so you can't get caught in the trap of justifying it to others, because there will always be people who live a different life than you, and might cause you to question your own. But if you really feel kind of sustained by your pursuit, it will be long lasting.

Question 3: What were things that were unplanned/unexpected but meaningful to your growth?

Response: I think that after you graduate from college, as an undergraduate, you make friends inevitably while you're an undergraduate in college and then you'll talk to those people like one year out, two years out, five years out, and they'll be like, *what are you doing and tell us about your life*. And there can feel like this need to justify your decision to pick a career path that's kind of difficult and not always easily translatable to other people who might feel like they don't quite understand what you're doing. And you might also have to explain it to your family members, and you might also have to justify it to yourself. I think that's okay. And I think that that was a difficult part of my journey because I didn't know if there would be a job at the end of the road. I graduated as an undergraduate into a recession. And then I finished my PhD recently in what looks like potentially another one. And so it's difficult, it's very difficult. It's not like I discovered that it was super easy, but it is a really rewarding path to take. And I think that it can help if you pursue creative and artistic practices beyond graduating. You can really make use of the knowledge that you gain in a liberal arts setting as an undergraduate. When you're studying as an undergraduate, you become hyper aware of important issues, maybe in your community, or historically, or globally. And if you design a career that really builds on that knowledge, it can be infinitely rewarding, because you can find yourself capable of learning more about those issues, developing the ability to change them. And I think that that can really pay you back in a way and all the kind of sacrifice that you put in, you can find has really made it worth it, because your career is something that you feel like is making a difference. And to not do that can sometimes perhaps lead you down a path where you can say, *Well, I made a lot of money, but I don't know if this feels like I've made the world a better place*. Perhaps. You won't question that if you pick a career that revolves around trying to advance social justice. I think people can delude themselves sometimes and think there are like hard skills and then everything else is like a pointless skill. And I don't buy that at all. I think that the hard skills are always something you could acquire later. If you buy the distinction between hard and soft skills, you can always learn to code in your own time after college if you really want to. But the ability to write, or the ability to present, or the ability to craft a portfolio—to just use those three examples—is really something that takes time and meditation and reflection. And that's harder to do on your own. So it can be really a big advantage to learn how to do those things in college.

Question 4: What advice do you have for your younger self?

Response: When you pursue a degree in a certain field, it's very difficult to become an expert in just a limited amount of study. And so I think that an education is more about learning how to learn. And it's kind of developing an awareness of how to gain the skills that you need, how to learn about a certain topic in a way that's filtering out bad information from good information, how to have the kind of patience and the stamina required to really dig deep on a particular topic. And so I wish I had more patience when I was coming up in my career. I think that looking back, I can see how every layer of everything I decided to study and research and learn created the situation that I'm in today, which I'm very grateful for. It's like layers of an onion or something. But you can't really see—if you look at any of them independently, it's very difficult

to see how they'll fit together. And if I could tell myself something a decade ago, it would be to have the patience to just let the layers kind of find their connections, you don't need to work really hard to create those connections. You don't need to force it. If you feel like you've pursued something in your career, and then you kind of abruptly choose something else, those things might come back around to join one another in a way that you can't expect. And I didn't know I always wanted to be an academic. And I even interned at NPR before I began my PhD program because I thought I might want to be a journalist. And I was really interested in radio journalism and music critics and things like that. And I kind of abandoned that to pursue a PhD program, or so I thought at the time. And then here I am today researching podcasts. And I realized that that's so connected to the work that I was doing as part of that internship. But I just needed the faith and the patience to let that happen and accept that you can only connect the dots when you look backwards. And don't be obsessed with trying to connect the dots by planning your future, because it's going to be impossible. If someone feels anxious about something, I totally get it and I harbor no judgment and complete empathy for that state because I have felt it. But you have to accept the things you can't change and try to change the things you can. But I think that trying to do too much or feeling like life is falling apart can sometimes lead to a kind of cataclysmic thinking that's not always true of reality. And that, too, I think that's another part of that patience dimension. And another part of that kind of having like, maybe call it wisdom or something. But just the recognition that you are probably more skilled and capable than you think you are. And that you have resources that can help you. If you have the patience, you can kind of see your way through various career paths in various steps in your career. And some of the hardest ones or some of the earliest ones. I think in my career sometimes it's like a kind of stairs, like it's bad because I don't want it to sound like I'm climbing a hierarchy and so I don't really like that. That's maybe a bad analogy. It's like stairs, but they don't go up, they go sideways [laughs]. But the first few steps that you take, I think right after college, are some of the hardest steps. There's some of the biggest leaps because it's difficult, especially when you graduate like, *What do I do? How far away am I from my dream job? What is my dream job? Will I ever have a dream job? I don't even know. Should I have majored in something else? Can I make enough money to live? Everybody around me is like pursuing these...everyone seems so successful. And I'm like the only one who is not having success.* All those feelings can kind of creep in easily. But having faith in yourself can be really valuable in those moments. And to recognize that you're capable, and those first few steps definitely get easier. And so those first few steps can be hard. But the distance between each step will become smaller the further you go in your career. It really is difficult to pick a path that other people aren't picking. And when I looked back, not everyone was becoming these extremely successful, like corporate driven or clear pathway driven people. But it felt that way to me at the time. And I think it was just my own distorted reality. It was easy to see the people who had achieved success, and it was easy to feel like I was not, like I had wandered somewhere different. And that was scary. For those who did not choose a creative or artistic path, it's never too late to do that. And whatever your background, that can be valuable in choosing a creative and artistic pathway forward. And so I think that people can always change and become something different than they formerly were. And so your path is not predetermined, and there's space to do a lot of things in life and so whether you've actively pursued artistic creative pathways or not, that pathway is still here for you in the future.