

TYLER WHITE: Hello and welcome. This is *The Nexus* brought to you by the African American Design Nexus, an initiative from the Frances Loeb Library at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. And my name is Tyler White, and I'm a dual master's candidate in urban planning and design studies and narratives here at the Graduate School of Design. The Design Nexus seeks to gather African-American designers to showcase their craft, explore different geographies of design practice, and inspire design institutions to adopt new approaches toward elevating Black designers.

Today, we're speaking with serpentwithfeet, who is simply letting the pendulum swing nowadays. The Baltimore, Maryland-born singer-songwriter is taking the natural steps as a versatile talent from chapter to chapter in his career. Serpent's third album *Grip* is a result of these latest steps. *Grip* finds its home on the dance floor of the club and the intimate moments that happen there and afterward no matter the location. Serpent's third album explores the intimate forms of physical touch and how they occur. Whether it be a grip around the waist or the face, serpentwithfeet managed to explore all angles thanks to the second lens he looked through.

Serpent said his intention on the world that he called home and the important adult years of his life, and with this, we see a study of community on grip. The community had a huge impact on the LA-based singer, and through 10 songs, he gives it its flowers with a body of work that highlights the moments that are most close to the heart. Throughout his eight-year career, Serpent has exhibited this versatility through experimental R&B music. Three years removed from his second album *Deacon*, serpentwithfeet continues to push the limits of his artistry with his third album *Grip*.

And with that, it is an honor to have you here today, Serpent. So our first question is going to be what are you listening to right now and how is it embodying or influencing your work.

SERPENTWITHFEET: I'm listening to a lot actually. I'm always playing music, which I guess is expected. I've actually really been into this new Normani song, "159," and also SZA's song "Ghost in the Machine," and there's another song that I've been playing a lot by this Brazilian trio from-- I want to say they're from the '70s I think. Forgive me if I'm mispronouncing their name but I think it's Os Tintoas. But they have this song called "Chorojo" that I love. Those are a few songs that I'm playing a lot.

And I suppose with those three, there's a warmth that I really appreciate. And with SZA's song "Ghost in the Machine," I just think the writing is nonpareil. It's so brilliant, and I'm always inspired by her writing style and just how sinuous it is but also how concise it is. So, yeah, that's been where I've been lately.

TYLER WHITE: Those are great songs to open with. So thank you. I'm such a nerd, but I remember when I first came across your work on ID, it was an A to Z of music, and you sang the G or the gospel.

And looking back on that, I'm just like how do you resonate with that genre today and in that multiplicity of your identity. How do you navigate that relationship specifically? I'm questioning does gospel have any kind of influence in your work, and if so, how do you resonate with that genre right now?

SERPENTWITHFEET: Well, I think around that time, that was many, many years ago, maybe 2015 or 2016 or something. I don't know. I remember that shoot. I remember being there. It was so long ago, so I'm sure I'm blanking on some details.

That was back when I did live in New York, and I think during that season of my life, I was exploring gospel and its expansiveness, and I think more particularly, I was really interested in how sensual and sensory the text was in the sacred text and also in the songs and the way that people would sing about spirit and God. It was very intimate and very charged. And I think we get a lot of evidence of that charged nature like in '90s and 2000s R&B, where I feel like a lot of the mainstream singers were either brought up in church or were still going to church. So I think you get a lot of that passion and fire.

So I think for me, I was just exploring that in my body. I have years of this information. Now how am I synthesizing it, and how has this impacted me in a way that I'm conscious of and not conscious of? But I feel like I did a lot of exploration of that, so I'm not in that season of my life anymore.

But I grew up in church, so the cadence, the call and response, will always be with me. And I think I brought up the Normani song "159," and the first thing that stuck out to me is in the chorus it's like call and response. And I just thought I'm always excited by Black music when even in this super modern context just feel really familiar to me. And I'm definitely in a different season of my life now, but I think the fabric will always be there.

TYLER WHITE:

That's beautiful. And I was listening to "Cherubim" also, and I love how you're just chanting like you want to worship him. And I love the way that you play with the duality of who him can be, and also the layering of that song is so impressive. And I'm really curious. Can you take me through your song writing and song producing process? And a much larger question than I'm interested in is how is songwriting and music production a form of design?

SERPENTWITHFEET:My process varies, which I think keeps the work exciting for me. I don't have a cheat code. I don't think

there's any shortcut to get to the song. So sometimes it can begin on piano. Sometimes it could begin with drums I produced. Or maybe it's an instrumental that another producer came up with, and I'm responding to that. Or sometimes we could be in the studio, me and some other musicians, and we jam. And then we want to take four bars of that, and we build on that.

So it really does vary, and I really appreciate the studio time-- the time to just play really. That's so important because you never know what you'll discover.

I think the process for me is just play. It's exploration and just trusting that even if you don't come up with something that day that you're closer to, something greater. So just being willing to surrender to the path. So maybe that's a big thing for me.

And you said something-- what is the question again about music and design?

TYLER WHITE: Yeah, I'm curious how songwriting and the way that you just described how it's very much a process in its play and you're engaging with folks, I'm just really curious how song production is a form of design. I think every time I listen to music, particularly in "Cherubim," the way that all of the melodies that you have layer themselves throughout the song but they emerge at different points, but it's at the end when it's very much culminating that you hear all of them together. And I think that is the beauty of it, and I feel like so much of design is synthesizing what to include and what to exclude. So I'm curious in terms of songwriting and music production, even how you're designing a song, how does that reflect or what is the design process I guess for you?

SERPENTWITHFEET: Yeah. I'm no technical expert, but what I will say is that I think obviously music itself is intangible and I suppose it's ephemeral. But from a technical end, it's a lot of design. Just even thinking about EQing or you may have some parts of the song where you want more or less low end, but I think an essential tool in music is space, is silence, which I guess like in fine art, you might call that negative space.

So I think for us it's knowing when to employ silence. It's knowing when to maybe just have the piano going on or maybe when to have a cappella or knowing when to drop the beat. That's all design and knowing how you want to EQ drums to make them knock more or to make certain parts less aggressive. It is very technical.

I am not a technician in that way, but you have people that are. You have the engineers that really know how to make a song sound incredible, and that's like the stuff you get on the radio. It's people designing that, taking a song, that artists record it, and then really being able to shape it. It is very creative, but it is a very technical craft.

TYLER WHITE: Yeah, absolutely. I love how you said ephemeral because that is very much almost like my next question here. Music has such a ephemeral but also a very material quality, and when I hear songs like "Fellowship," which I saw Lil Silva was on-- love him and Sampha, who I just saw his concert recently-- I'm transported in memory to singing this in the car with my friends. But most interestingly, I think it helps me imagine how I want to feel someday, and I'm really curious.

What is that quality of music that can feel so resonant with a shared experience of others but it's also very imaginative and allowing people to maybe connect with something that you're already feeling? And doubly on that, the thing I love so much about you and I give so much kudos to you is how beautifully not marketed but the identity that is you is so clear, but it also is very intentionally presenting a certain kind of display and aesthetic of love that is not oftentimes represented.

And the thing I love about your music is that you give me the ability to sing a song and then actually have that connect with real experiences that I've had. And I don't have to change the gender of the person. I can very much imagine the specificity of living that. And I'm just curious. What is that quality of music to be able to allow people to imagine who they want to be or imagine experience that they want to have?

SERPENTWITHFEET: That's a loaded question. So I think what I'm always in pursuit of is something that I've witnessed in other people's music. I don't think I'm reinventing the wheel. I think I'm just responding to music that is shaped and nurtured and excited me.

And the first things I think of, I think of Brandy. I think of Grace Jones. I think of Bjork. I think of Frank Ocean. I think of people who seem to really get to the center of the feeling, and they're interested in the margins as well. But they know how to get to the center, and they do it in such a graceful way. And they've definitely impacted the way that I approach songwriting or music production or co-production or storytelling.

I think about FKA Twigs and what she's done with her work, and I think it's about, again, getting to the center of the feeling and exploring the margins, doing both and telling full stories. It excites me. It really does.

Yeah, you mentioned Sampha. I think he's also really great at that. With this album, I absolutely love and his previous-- I've been a fan of Sampha since day one, so--

TYLER WHITE: Amen.

SERPENTWITHFEET: It was honestly an honor to work on "Fellowship" with him, and he had such brilliant ideas and brought so much life and wonder to that song. So I think there are a lot of influences there, but I think I've had a lot of great guides. But, yeah, but I think it's about you're talking about design, just really crafting the right language and working a line as much as you need to until you get the right thing. So that's my thought.

TYLER WHITE: I love this idea of iteration. I feel like so much of design education is iteration and also precedents. So folks like Tabitha, FKA, like Sampha, Grace Jones, Bjork, Frank, it all makes sense that we're-- I love that you said that we're not reinventing the wheel. So this idea that we're always paying homage and the production of it is always an ode to what influenced it, so that makes me so happy.

Transitioning a little bit more to some more recent stuff that you've been doing, I saw that you posted last week about Kickback, and I'm curious if you can walk us through the intention of this space, especially one that you are calling a parlor. I think that's such a cool way to define it because I think it speaks back to the role of salons in these spaces where folks get together to have discussions and that being so generative in not only sharing ideas but also affirming one another's identity. And I'm really curious just if you could reflect on how this came about, and more specifically what is your intention behind producing spaces for Black queer folks?

SERPENTWITHFEET: So I started hosting some gatherings a couple of years ago, and I was calling it Serpent's Parlor. And the initial thought was that I just wanted to intentionally create spaces, physical spaces, for me and my brothers. I think oftentimes we'll run into each other at an event or there'll be these coincidental moments where we'll have these heart to hearts, and I just wondered what would happen if we actually scheduled it.

And I was also thinking a lot about the work of our elders, some that are living and some that aren't, for example, the Joseph Beams and Essex Hemphills that have created so much work, and I just wondered what would happen if we were able to reference them in real time and talk about the work that they've written and also talk about what we're experiencing from day to day. It's been a really beautiful gathering over the past couple of years.

And there's one that's filmed, and it's on YouTube. It's sponsored by Vans, but the Kickbacks I've been doing are way more casual. And, yeah, it's just been a great time to fellowship and kiki and to just build community, and that's been a really nourishing event that I'm really happy to have started and be continuing.

TYLER WHITE: It makes sense, and I love how authentic it is. It doesn't really seem like it needs to have the explanation because it is just being generated from your experiences. And I love this idea of expressing and sharing. Could you maybe share something that you have read or watched recently that is helping you through some stuff right now?

SERPENTWITHFEET: Yeah, I think one thing thinking about physical spaces, and I've been reading this book *The Sisterhood*. It's about the collective of Black women writers Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, June Jordan, Ntozake Shange but them creating spaces to share, discuss, to give critiques on each other's work and how they changed American literature because of the spaces that they shared.

TYLER WHITE: I love that. You said so many great things, specifically Ms. Morrison, who I think has been the most impactful thinker for me, just in the way that she always approaches her work, which I think you do, too, from this perspective, that I'm already in the world that I'm creating, so it's for you to find out what that is. And by virtue of me doing that, you will understand how that relates to your own world. That is such an amazing quality because it goes beyond having to be anti-racist, or it goes beyond having to speak from an identity. It just allows you to be.

I love that you said June Jordan because I just recently was in one of my courses found out that she worked with architects during the late 1960s to--

SERPENTWITHFEET: Oh, amazing.

TYLER WHITE: Imagine the future of what Harlem could be because that was the way in a lot of urban renewal was happening and Harlem was being completely transformed with all this federal housing. But she was a part of another group of Black architects called the Architects Review Committee, and they did a lot of great work in Harlem. But it's just always interesting because she's known as a poet and not necessarily as an architect or a planner, but I love when folks that are outside of these disciplines bring something very authentic to it.

And talking about being outside of disciplines, I also saw that you have *Heart of Brick* that's coming out soon and Germany I believe it is this summer. And I'm curious. What medium do you not perform in, but beyond that, how does this stage present a different performance typology? And what is the space that you will be dealing with physically, but how does transitioning this into this kind of a form, what does it speak to physically I guess? Why choose this?

SERPENTWITHFEET: We debuted *Heart of Brick*-- it was either July or August of last year, and then we did the American debut at the Joyce Theater in New York. I'm incredibly grateful and excited that we were able to create this work. It's such massive and brilliant team, Raja Feather Kelly, choreographer and dramaturg. We had Wu Tsang, who was our director and a host of other people.

It took a lot of hands to get this recipe right. It wasn't a solo endeavor at all. But I've been wanting to create a theatrical work for years, and I've been dreaming up this idea for a while. And this opportunity presented itself. We were really excited to work on it.

And so the Joyce produced it and super grateful, but I love really great stories. Whether it's limited television series or whether it's a stop motion film or a dance production, I really love storytelling, and I've wanted to do this since the beginning of my career.

So, yeah, it's really exciting to me. It's a dance heavy production. It's a lot of dance, so I'm dancing and singing live. And there's costume design and lighting, and there's also text. So we're all doing a lot in the show.

It really excites me. I really enjoy learning new things on stage every night. And the cast is fantastic. It's so incredible working with them. So I feel really blessed that this is my first time doing something like this, and I got to have such a great team. So I'm looking forward to traveling with it again this summer.

TYLER WHITE: That's so many different mediums of things going on. Could you just tell us a little bit about maybe what it's about, what the story is, and also why was theater the choice that you wanted to tell this story in? Your music is always telling stories. Your art is always telling stories, but I guess why theater.

SERPENTWITHFEET: Yeah the *Heart of Brick* is a theatrical production about two guys that fall in love. My character, who I play a version of myself, Serpent, and Brick, who is a bouncer at a local club. It's about me and Brick falling in love and the club patrons and the elder in the community and our relationships with each other and how they develop and our trust or lack of trust. That's the story in a nutshell. It's a love story, but it's also a story about community and friendship and trust.

And why theater? Well, I got my start-- before I became a recording artist, my background is theater. I studied musical theater. I studied classical music. I studied jazz. So I think all of that is in there.

And I've always been interested in doing my best to push the narrative to the edge of the universe as much as I can. And it's something that I've been wanting to do.

TYLER WHITE: Just picking up exactly the last thing that you said, pushing the narrative to the edge of the universe, what does it mean to push the narrative to the edge of the universe, what narrative are you pushing, and how do you think Black designers, whatever that means to you, can be a part of extending that narrative and giving it more space?

SERPENTWITHFEET: Well, I think on the surface, I'm interested in the aesthetics being pushed and obviously not just sartorially, but I think what does R&B sound like in different landscapes. What does blues sound like in different landscapes? And I think that's a production thing. That's a songwriting thing.

Again, thinking of aesthetics, I obviously have to mention the Missys and the Busta Rhymes and not just what they were doing visually but what they were doing sonically. The way that Missy was playing with space and silence and onomatopoei, I think there's a lot of that is really incredible. Yeah, so I think maybe the aesthetic's what I think about first.

I also think-- I mentioned Frank Ocean and definitely the early works with *Nostalgia*, *Ultra*, and *Channel Orange* and him pushing the narrative of what it means to be so in tune with his feelings and having the courage to articulate that and also to observe the world around him with such a fresh lens and then being able to record that and put that on paper, I think for me it really pushed the narrative of what it means to be a songwriter who is in this pop world or R&B world. So I think I guess I could wax poetic about this for a while, but I'm often thinking about song writing and sonic landscapes and how we can just expand. I think it's just more just expanding. Expanding.

TYLER WHITE: Thank you so much for your time, Serpent. I'd like to end it off with one of your works whatever it may be, a song, maybe other things that you're doing that you think listeners should consume next.

SERPENTWITHFEET: I recently dropped my album called *Grip*. You can listen to that. And, yeah, thank you again for having me.

TYLER WHITE: Thank you again, Serpent. It's been a pleasure.

I'm Tyler White, and you've been listening to *The Nexus*, a product of the African American Design Nexus at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. Today's episode was produced and edited by Maggie Janik, and we would like to thank DJ Eway for our theme music. To learn more about the African-American Design Nexus, visit us online at AADN.gsu.harvard.edu.