

## [Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Rick Rubin Says Trust Your Gut, Not Your Audience

I'm Barry Weiss, and this is Honestly.

People don't usually think about Adele in the same breath as Johnny Cash.

The Beastie Boys.

In the same breath as Jay-Z.

Justin Bieber.

And Slayer.

Neil Young.

And Kanye West.

But all of these musicians have a single person in common.

And that is producer Rick Rubin.

I wasn't expecting any of the records I've made to sell as well as they have.

But then again, that was never the intention.

Over the past 40 years, Rubin has produced some of the world's most popular records.

Wake up!

He started at NYU in the 80s when he created Def Jam Records from his college dorm room.

And from that tiny dorm room, help launched the global phenomenon that is hip hop.

Some 40 years later, Rick Rubin works on up to 10 records a year, mostly from his Malibu home known as Shangri-La.

And though he might dispute the label, he's become something of a high priest or maybe it's a guru or a sensei of American popular music.

To put his life's work producing music into words, he recently wrote a book called *The Creative Act, A Way of Being*.

It's a really unusual book that's not just about how to make art, but about a certain way of being in the world.

Today, I talked to Rick Rubin about the music that shaped him, about what it means to produce an artist's work, and about the growing self-censorship in our music, art, and culture.

He also tells me how he's learned to trust his own taste and intuition, and how the rest of us need to learn how to second guess ourselves a little less.

Stay with us.

Rick Rubin, welcome to Honestly.

Thank you for having me.

I'm very interested in the way people were raised and the way that impacts their life.

Did you grow up in a particularly musical family or was music an escape from your family?

Was it a reflection of your parents or was it a rebellion against your parents?

I would say it's both. My dad loved Latin jazz music, and I followed in his footsteps in some way in that when he was young, he would go to jazz clubs in Manhattan and Brooklyn and in the Tri-State area, where he would be the only white person in a black club.

And I got to have that experience in hip hop. I'm only noting that fact as it relates to my dad's experience, but I wouldn't note that fact about myself. I don't think of it that way.

But I do think of what the lines are that my dad and I share. So the music he loved was very rhythmic.

My dad had a particular Tito Puente album, which I've since found out was Tito Puente's very first album. I think it's from 1956.

And I just came across it maybe six months ago for the first time since then, since childhood.

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It put me right back in that same cluttered room where I first heard the music.

It's as good today as it was all those years ago.

It's amazing.

What is your earliest musical memory?

I think dancing to a Beatles song when I was two or three years old.

And it's interesting because it's a Beatles song, but the Beatles didn't write it. It was Chuck Berry's rock and roll music as performed by the Beatles.

I remember feeling the energy of the music and almost feeling like my body was out of control. And it was a great feeling. It was a positive feeling of being out of control.

Then I remember there was a store called TSS, Times Square Store, that was one of the early big box stores. And my mom would go to Times Square Store to shop for other things because they had everything.

And I would always spend the whole time in the record department.

And I remember Chuck Berry had a song that was popular when I was a kid. It was like his last hit after he was already kind of gone.

I found the single for the Chuck Berry song and then I asked him, does Chuck Berry have an album yet?

And they just kind of looked at me and laughed and they were like, come with us. And they took me to the Chuck Berry section and there were like 40 albums.

It didn't make any sense because that wasn't the case for any of the other music I was listening to.

So it was like a revelation that there could be all of this music from a person who I'm just hearing for the first time.

Let's go to 1981, 1982, your first year, second year I believe, student at NYU.

And you famously, and this is part of the Rick Rubin legend, you transform your dorm room and NYU into the headquarters for Def Jam Records,

one of the earliest hip hop recording labels. I'm very interested in how things begin.

What was the moment that, looking back on it, you realize, oh wow, I was starting to build a business?

The first records I recorded were just with my punk rock band. I had that experience first.

And just learned a little bit about how to be in a recording studio, what to do.

And when I say learned, I experienced it because no one really taught me and I purposely liked not doing things the way that they were done.

I can remember I was listening to something that sounded really good in the engineer, the professional,

I was like, oh no, the meters are in red, you can't do that, but I like the way it sounds.

Is it going to break anything? They're like, no, it's okay, let's keep it like that.

I was looking for a sound that was interesting to me and then I spent a lot of time in hip hop clubs.

This is the early days of hip hop where it was really one night a week that you'd go out in New York and hear hip hop downtown.

An English woman, K.L.B. Cool Lady Blue, had a hip hop night and she brought MCs and DJs from the Bronx, Harlem, and Queens.

And I would go to that every week.

I'd recognized that the music that I was hearing in the club and the records that were coming out that were rap records weren't really hip hop records.

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The sound at the club was the hip hop sound, but the records didn't reflect that. The records were too slick and they were too produced.

So I started recording hip hop records really just as a documentarian and for myself as a fan.

And in terms of it being a business, there were no thoughts about that.

There were only concerns about I want to make this thing that sounds good to me and that I think my friends who like the music I like, we're all going to like this.

That was the initial thrust of it.

And then the first record I made in that way was called It's Yours by Tila Rock and Jazzy J.

And then I met someone named Arthur Baker. He had a label that was more of an R&B label, but then he had another label called Party Time, which was for more of the weirder or harder rap rappers.

So he asked if we could put it out on Party Time and then I designed the Def Jam logo and I said I'll put it out on Party Time provided I could have the Def Jam logo on it.

And Rick, did any money change hands there? Was there any contract? Was there anything formal at all?

I think there may have been a contract and I think they said they would pay us something like \$2,000, but I don't even remember if they did.

But it also wasn't important. It was like we're going to actually have a record out. It wasn't a business thing.

It was more of these people help us let people hear this thing. That's what it was from the beginning.

So that record got successful. And then the next record I made was with LL Cool J, who was a 16-year-old kid who sent me a demo to the dorm room because he heard Tila Rock, it's yours.

And then I had my first meeting with LL Cool J and that happened at the dorm.

I played him some beats that I was working on with a drum machine that actually borrowed from some older student.

And he started rhyming right away.

And then he brought me notebooks with pages of lyrics.

I looked at the lyrics and tried to put them into song structure form, which is something that at that point there hadn't really been much of that in hip hop. It was more of an extension of Jamaican toasting.

So the early rap records might be an eight or nine minute song of a guy rapping, telling a story in rap, but it didn't have a chorus or a refrain.

It wasn't structured like a song. But I grew up on Beatles, so what made a song work in those days was the structure.

So I looked at LL songs like, okay, let's see if there's a phrase in this that could work repeated to be the chorus.

And then let's use these eight lines as the first verse and let's use these eight lines as the second verse and let's use these as this other part.

And I finished the recording and at this point I had just met Russell Simmons, who was the older brother of Run from Run DMC.

And he managed pretty much everybody in hip hop because again, it was a tiny little world.

I played it for him and I said, what do you think I ought to do with this?

And he's like, well, we could give it to profile or any names, all the different independent labels.

And I said, but why don't we just do it ourselves?

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I'll make all the records and I'll handle all the business and you just be my partner.

And he said, okay, let's do that.

And the reason I wanted him to be my partner was he was already in the record business and I'm kid in school.

Well, you were at NYU, you had a kind of front row seat to what's now I think regarded as one of the most important cultural moments in the history of New York City.

You had the post-punk of Blondie and the Talking Heads.

You have the art of Keith Herring and Basquiat.

You have the LL Cool J who you mentioned, the pioneering rap of him, Run DMC.

What accounted for it, right?

Like, you can think back in time and you're like, ah, the Medici's were there, this is why this happened.

What was going on in New York at the time?

What was going on in the cultural DNA of that moment that allowed for the flourishing of all of this art?

I think at that point in time, New York, it was run down.

There were a lot of boarded up buildings.

It was cheap to be there so artists could move and live there easily.

They can't do that anymore.

There were so many nightclubs and so much live music going on and I got to see the Ramones play all the time.

I got to see the Bad Brains play. I got to see the Talking Heads play.

I got to see Blondie play.

I got to see everybody play.

It was an incredible time to be going to school and going out every night and seeing the greatest...

I didn't know it was the greatest music, maybe some of the greatest music of all time, but...

But did you realize that you were living through a special moment as you were living through it?

No, no, no, no.

It seemed like this is what now is like, you know?

And I think maybe because of our age, it seems like a special moment,

whereas the people who are living now in 30 years might look back on this moment as a special moment.

I wouldn't be surprised.

As you're partnering with Russell Simmons, you're making these early records, when did you know you were a music producer?

When did that moment happen where you thought, this is going to be my life?

I never thought it was going to be my life.

The big moment of decision was when I was supposed to take the LSATs.

We had just gotten a big check from Columbia Records.

Def Jam got picked up by Columbia Records as like an associated label or something like that.

And at that point, it became more real.

And it was what I was doing full-time anyway, even though it wasn't a career path I was on, it was my interest and I was spending all of my time doing my interest.

I barely was going to school.

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I went school enough to graduate, but that's all.

And then when the deal with Columbia happened and we were funded, my parents were open to the idea of me spending a year in the music industry before I went to law school.

So I did that.

And then luckily in that first year, L Cool J's first album, Beastie Boy's album, a bunch of things happened where I just never really looked back.

But none of the things that have happened over the course of my life have been based on a plan or a goal ever.

I followed my interests and recognized if there was an opportunity that would allow me to keep following my interest, I would follow that.

Let's talk a little bit about what it actually means to be a music producer.

I watched an interview this week as I was preparing to talk to you in which you said, I don't know anything about music.

You said, you don't really play any musical instruments.

You don't know how to run a sound board.

You don't really have any technical abilities at all.

So when you're working with all of these musicians that you work with, what is it you're doing for them?

How do you help them?

It's almost like being a trusted creative partner.

It could be like another band member.

But it's an interesting position I'm in because many artists today write their own material.

And if you've ever written anything and if you've ever worked with an editor, you know that the right editor can make you much better as a writer.

And some of the time, that's my job.

Some of the time, it's like being an editor for a writer.

Because I'm not attached to the material personally in a way that the writer is,

I'm closer to the audience than I am to the artist in the way that I hear what comes in.

So I'm like a professional audience member, essentially.

And I really listen and I'm really in tune with what's going on inside of me.

And if something interests me and excites me and pulls me forward, I take that as a good sign.

And if something seems like I don't want to hear this anymore, I want to hit the stop button.

I take that as a bad sign.

So it's pretty easy in terms of following my taste.

And then that just gets distilled down to many small decisions.

And I've been doing it long enough where I know there isn't one right way to do anything.

So often, I'm calling to the attention of the artist a place where I think something can be made better.

And then often, they make it better.

If they can't make it better, we'll talk about ideas and see if anything sparks an idea to make it better.

And if that doesn't work, then I may say, how about if we try it like this?

But that would be the last resort.

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Whereas in early in my career, I didn't understand that yet.  
And I just made the decisions.  
You've called yourself a reducer, not a producer.  
Tell me what you mean by that.  
Well, I think of the idea of producing something as building it up, as making it bigger.  
And my taste tends to be minimal.  
So often, I'm called into a project and I hear there are 30 tracks, 50 tracks, 90 tracks.  
And I listen to them and say, OK, what's really necessary?  
Maybe five, maybe three.  
So I spend a lot of time taking things away and looking for space.  
What that does is if you hear one guitar played with emotion,  
you can hear the intensity of the guitar pick hitting the strings.  
You could hear the fingers sliding on the neck of the guitar.  
You can hear the personality of the person playing it.  
Now, if you double, triple, quadruple the guitar, which is a common thing that people do,  
and you stack those guitars up, then you have this like more like a Phil Spector,  
a wall of sound, a wall of guitar.  
I tend to be more interested in the personality of the one than in the scale of the wall.  
I'm really curious about the process of collaboration.  
An artist or a band comes to you at your recording studio in Malibu at Shangri-La.  
What do they need to bring in order for you to work well?  
Can they just come with an idea?  
What is the least amount of material an artist can have when they're approaching you to make a song?  
It really is case specific.  
It depends on the artist process.  
There are some artists who, their process is to show up with nothing and make something in that day.  
And that's their process.  
And I'm respectful of an artist process.  
Most of the artists I work with write songs in advance,  
and we come in with at least a first draft of material to start from.  
But there is no rule.  
There's no right way to do anything when it comes to creativity.  
It's all experimenting, trial and error.  
And I've done it so many different ways with so many different artists.  
Sometimes they tell me they don't know what they want to do.  
And then they tell me exactly what they want to do.  
Thinking they don't know what it is.  
I listen to what they tell me.  
And usually when you listen to people, they really tell you about themselves.  
They tell you who they are.  
They tell you what they think.  
They tell you what they want to do.

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And I trust them when they say what they want.

Well, there's something like deeply psychological about the work that you do with people.

Do you think of it that way?

Well, it ends up being that way because the ways that we get in our own way are all psychological.

So to combat the I'm not good enough or second guessing yourself,

those are psychological issues.

Usually successful artists have all this popularity.

Most of them know they're good at what they do,

but they're not so good at what they do that the relationship with the audience completely makes sense.

Because why me and not this other, there's another artist I like just as much as what I do.

And they're not popular and I'm really popular.

What's the difference?

So there's a almost imposter syndrome that many artists have.

You've said that you don't listen to the music when you're working.

You're listening to a feeling.

How do you listen to a feeling?

What does that mean?

Well, I don't listen to any of the individual elements or I'll say I try not to because sometimes it's very difficult to overcome that.

My goal is to listen in a way where I'm listening to the whole picture of what's going on, not the individual parts and listening to this whole picture and feeling what's going on in my body.

Where I'm getting, again, pulled forward, excited, curious, where I want to hear what's coming next, surprised, those are all great.

And what's wild about it is you can tell sometimes in the first two notes, doesn't even the song hasn't started yet.

And you can hear the pickup into it and right from the start, it's like, oh, this is exciting.

It doesn't always stay, but you can feel it right away before you get to any words, before you get to anything.

There's an energy and you either feel the energy or you don't, and if I don't feel the energy, then there's usually a conversation about, I don't know that we can start here.

But if there is energy somewhere, it's like, OK, this is where the energy is.

How do we expand that to all be like that?

Or maybe even more of that than is currently there.

How did you learn to trust your taste and your gut and what you are pulled toward and not either A, second guess it, or B, be influenced by others taste?

Let's start with the A of that question, which is your own taste.

If you go to the museum and you see two paintings and someone said, which one do you like better?

Can you tell which one you like better?

Usually, you like one more than the other.

It doesn't have to make sense.

You don't have to know why, but you know that.

Now, nobody could argue with you.

No, you don't like that one more than the other one.

You know, there's choice A and choice B.

I like choice B.

No, no, but A is better.

No, I'm not asking which is better.

I'm asking which one do I like?

It's so simple. It's so straightforward that if you reduce it to what do you like and you know what you like?

What TV show do you want to see the next episode?

Which ones do you want to turn off?

If you want to turn it off, bad sign.

If you can't wait for the next episode, good sign.

That's all it is.

That's it.

So having confidence in your taste is easy because do I want to watch the next episode or not?

We all do it all day.

When we start looking at what happens after that, it clouds the picture.

And what happens after that is not important and it's not part of the creative process.

That's something else.

That's marketing.

That's promotion.

That's commerce, but that's not art.

The art part is what's the thing that appeals to me?

Is there anything I can do to make it more appealing to me?

Are there any aspects of it that could be better than they are?

That's all it is.

So it's very easy to have confidence in your opinion.

I would say most people do.

They just don't embrace it.

I mean, what you're saying is beauty's in the eye of the beholder.

You might like Mo Diggliani, I might like Picasso, but let's take a more extreme example.

You go to the house in Santa Monica of Charles and Ray Eames and there is something just deeply satisfying about that.

And then you look at photographs of Trump's golden toilet and you're repulsed by it.

So there is such thing.

I will agree that there are absolutely differences at the margins.

You might like Basquiat better than Herring, whoever we're talking about before.

But do you believe there is such a thing as having good taste is a question I wondered as I read your book?

Yes and no.

So yes, but it's a cultural question.

The way you're describing it is based on your experience of growing up.

If you came from the Philippines and you got to see the Eames house or the gold toilet, you might be more impressed by the gold toilet.

So I can't say there's not a blanket for any of these things.

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Everything is dependent on context.

I know I like the things I like.

Some of the things I like are considered high art and some of the things I like are considered low art.

I don't care. That's not why I'm not picking them for those reasons.

It's like, how could there be a guilty pleasure?

If you like it, it's pleasurable. There's no guilt in you liking what you like.

Do you know what I'm saying? It doesn't have to do with anyone else what you like.

But people are basically wanting to work with you because they believe you have better taste than other people.

And do you think that you do?

I think I've spent a lot of time developing my taste, but it's my taste.

It's not the right taste. It's my taste.

I wouldn't say if we both looked at something and you said you liked it and I said I didn't like it, I would never say I'm right.

You're wrong. It's crazy. It's a crazy idea.

It's always apples and oranges. Everyone has their own.

It really is in the eye of the beholder. It truly is. It truly is.

Just because a lot of people like it doesn't make it better than the one that other people don't as many people don't like.

It's not democratic in that way. It's personal.

So something like an Oscar in your industry, a Grammy, it's not really a marker.

What is that a marker of in your view?

The whole idea of competition is strange to me. It's just strange to me.

I mean, I've won some awards and it's nice to be recognized, but it's strange and it doesn't make sense.

You can't take, let's come up with two artists.

Beyonce and Rihanna.

Okay. So Beyonce makes a new album. Rihanna makes a new album.

Is Beyonce's album a better Rihanna album than Rihanna's album?

And is Rihanna's album a better Beyonce album than Beyonce's album?

The answer is no. It's always Beyonce is doing this because this is what she does.

Rihanna is doing this because this is what she does.

And the same is true because in the competition, you might have Bob Dylan versus the Rolling Stones or Travis Scott versus Taylor Swift.

Who's to say one of those is better than the other?

So competition makes no sense. It seems that makes the business people excited.

And unfortunately, many artists get sucked into it and it can get in the way of their work.

You have very strong intuitions about music. Do you have similarly strong intuitions and taste about other art forms like books or movies or television shows?

I'll say sometimes yes, sometimes no. And I would say same degree with music.

Like I like some music that's not popular and I like some music that's very popular.

I like weird things. So sometimes I like the weird thing. That's the thing that breaks through and everybody likes.

System of a Down. Perfect example. When I signed System of a Down, they'd been turned down by

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every record company in the world.

An Armenian heavy metal band. Nobody was really excited about an Armenian heavy metal band. I went to see them, made me laugh. I laughed the whole time. They weren't trying to be funny, I don't think.

But it was just funny to me. That was the way it struck me and I loved it and I thought it was so great.

And I signed them and I remember there was a radio station, K-Rock in Los Angeles, which is the main alternative rock station at that time,

where if K-Rock played it, then all the other stations in the country would play it.

And they were the hometown group. And I met with Kevin Weatherly, who was the program director of the station.

And he said, this is a band we will never play on our station. This music is crazy music. This has nothing to do with what we do.

We will never play this. One year later, number one group on the station, most popular, most played on the station.

So when I signed them, I didn't sign them thinking this is going to be the next big thing. It would be insane to think that.

I saw it. It's insane. It was insane to think hip hop would be big. I didn't think it would be big. I just knew I liked it.

So I like the things I like. And luckily, I've been in the right place at the right time for some of those things to get to be in the world and experience their moment.

Rick, you've worked with artists. I kind of couldn't believe the list when I looked at it.

It's every genre. It's everyone from Kanye to the black crows to Adele to Johnny Cash. What's the special sauce? What is the thing that you look for when you're deciding who you want to work with? It's not a thing. It's like falling in love.

A feeling.

You connect to it or, you know, and now because I've been doing as long as I have, I feel like if an artist comes to me for help, even if it's not something that's my particular wheelhouse, if there was one, I don't even know if there is.

But not something that's like, this is the thing I want to listen to all the time.

I can usually help them find the best version of themselves, because that's what it has become over time. It started in the early days. It was more about my taste.

Still, my taste is involved, but now it's about helping the artist be the best version of themselves.

And for an artist who has fans, fans like an artist who's doing the best version of themselves.

There's no way to know if you're second guessing yourself what's good.

If you're thinking about it, that's not it. It's not done through thinking. It's done through feeling and emotion and connection.

And thinking happens after. When you see something you love, you see a movie you love, when you're in that moment of joy, you're not thinking, oh, I love this because this, this, this and this.

You don't think that. You don't think, I love it because of the writing. I love it because of the acting. You just love this. You're in it and you're loving this thing.

After you might say, why was this so much better than all the other movies I've seen? And then you might try to figure it out.

But it doesn't happen the other way around. It's the feeling that comes up in you that tells you it's

great.

And then after you try to reverse engineer, why did I like it? What was it that I liked? And sometimes you can't figure it out. And that's fine.

You know, same, like, sometimes we'll like a version of something and then we'll make a technically better version of it. And we listen to it.

It's like, the technically better version isn't as good as the one that we thought wasn't good enough. One thing I've thought about when I was reading your book is the role of the audience, right?

You have helped people make music that has resonated with tens of millions of people, maybe more, hundreds, an enormous number of people.

And yet, sort of a la Steve Jobs, you've said, you don't think about the audience because the audience doesn't know what they want.

I want to understand the tension between working with a popular artist that wants to reach huge numbers of people and the need to tune out that very audience.

How do you make sense of that? To me, what is a paradox?

There are two completely different things. It's fine to want to connect with an audience.

And if you want to connect with an audience, you have to ignore them when you're making the work.

Because if you're making the work for the audience, it's no longer a genuine work.

It's no longer authentic. The authenticity is what makes it good.

Putting yourself into it, flaws and all, ugly and all, beautiful and all, weird and all.

All of those things are what makes people connect.

So if you know that, if you know, like when I say the audience comes last, I do mean it.

But the reason the audience comes last is the audience has to come last in service to the audience.

If you're making it for the audience, you will undershoot the target.

If you're making it for yourself, you'll do the best work.

And even further, I'll say something I realized recently is that I always, I use the word greatness all the time.

In the book, I talk about aiming for greatness, aiming for greatness, aiming for greatness.

I realized recently that without knowing it, maybe an easier way to understand it is, everything we make, we're making as an offering to God.

If you're making an offering to God, you're not taking any shortcuts.

I want to start crying saying this.

You're not taking any shortcuts.

You're not thinking what, you know, what the radio station's gonna think.

It's a different head.

It's like, I want to do the best I could do in a universal way for something that I don't understand.

There are no metrics for what I'm talking about.

I've always done that, but I didn't know that's what it was.

Now I realize, oh, that's what it's always been.

That's what it's always been.

After the break, is creativity something that you can learn, or is it just innate and inborn in some people?

Stay with us.

I know I have a fickle heart and a bitterness and a wandering eye and a heaviness in my head.

But don't you remember.

Don't you remember.

I don't consider myself a very musical person, but I do consider myself somewhat of a creative person.

I know how to bring things into being, and I definitely think I know how to collaborate with other people.

But as I was reading your book, some of it seemed foreign to me because it's very different from the way that I create things,

which may be a question if maybe we have different understandings of what creativity is.

So I wondered if maybe I could ask you, how do you define creativity?

Yeah, I don't know.

I think definitions and labels tend to make things smaller.

So if we define it, then we're going to find an exception to that, and then it negates it.

Let me ask you another way.

You talk about teaching people to harness creativity, but I think a lot of us grow up with the idea that creativity is something that's innate and inborn, and that certain people have it more than others.

So it's the extra thing, right, that distinguishes a great wedding band singer from an Adele.

Do you think that's a fundamental misconception that certain people have a certain thing and other people have less of that thing?

I think both of those things are true.

I think there are people who are the great wedding singer who is every bit as good as the Grammy-winning multi-million seller.

The things that allow us to be successful are completely out of our hands.

I gave you the example earlier about I happened to be in New York City when hip-hop was happening.

Had I not been, my life would have been different.

That's a very specific thing.

If you don't grow up in a place that allows you to be the thing that you want to be, and you can't know that,

and you can't decide, first of all, you can't decide where you're going to be born,

it's impossible to know where and when a new movement is going to start, especially from the beginning.

You're going to look into whatever that is, or it'll be some sort of a divine thing that's going on.

That's one of the reasons I talk a lot about being in tune with what's going on.

It's like if you get quiet inside, and if you connect to your surroundings, the things that pull you forward,

the fact that they're pulling you forward, they already exist in the world.

It's not so foreign, this idea of creativity.

It happens on a daily basis for everyone.

Every one of us is creative all day.

We just don't think of it that way.

But in every decision we make, the reason we make a left turn instead of a right turn, because we want to avoid the traffic, is a creative decision.

To add more salt or less on your food is a creative decision.

Everything we do is a creative decision.

And yes, some people are more naturally gifted than others, but that doesn't matter.

And there are some of the most naturally gifted people in the world you've never heard of, and are homeless people, because whatever gifts they have artistically come with an imbalance or sensitivity

that makes it impossible to function in society.

I like the way that you describe that quality in your book.

You talk about how all human beings have antenna, but artists have particularly sensitive antenna.

They hurt more.

Maybe they have higher highs and lower lows.

How can you make your antenna more sensitive?

Is that a skill that can be taught?

Absolutely.

Anything that involves getting quieter and closer to your center,

like closer to who you are, less distracted by what someone else says,

what an expert is telling you, how your favorite artist does it, all of those things.

It can be helpful to try on as an idea.

Oh, my favorite artist does it this way.

Let me try that.

There's nothing wrong with trying it.

There's nothing wrong with imitating someone until you find your way.

But in terms of developing your sensitivity, it's more of an internal practice.

It's an awareness practice.

So through Buddhist meditation, through transcendental meditation,

anything that quiets your thinking mind to get closer to whatever connections you're feeling.

How do you do it, and when did you learn the right tools for you?

I'm always experimenting with new tools.

I learned TM when I was 14.

I do that often.

TM, transcendental meditation.

Transcendental meditation.

I've done that on and off most of my life.

I've done vipassana.

I do guided meditations.

I do yoga nidra on a pretty regular basis.

I do tai chi ruler practice.

I do contemplation.

I pray.

I do a lot of practices.

How does the internet and your relationship to technology fit into your ability to concentrate deeply?

What's your relationship like to technology, to your phone?

How do you tune out the noise that seems to come with that technology?

I definitely get the noise that comes with the technology,

and I'm in the times that I'm not engaged directly in the creative process.

I allow that for myself.

I don't know how good it is, honestly.

I don't know that it's a good or a bad thing.

But I feel like I can get inspired through those avenues as well.

I definitely learn things or hear about things that I wouldn't hear about otherwise that are interesting to me.

So I do have those lean forward experiences, but it's a give and take.

But when I'm focused on a particular task, that's all that's going on.

That's the only thing that's happening in the world.

When we're working on a song, when we're working on a project, now we're having this interview, there's nothing else.

This is all there is.

So this is my focus, this is what we're doing.

When you look back to earlier periods of your life, going to those record stores, buying the singles, listening to them, probably over and over again,

how does the cultural context and the technological revolution that we're living through, how has it changed our ability to listen deeply?

It's harder to engage long term.

When I was young, if an artist put out a new album that you were excited about, you would listen to that for years.

And now, even with the artists that you love,

when you listen to those albums, it tends to be a few days, maybe two weeks.

And I think that's just the nature of the streaming revolution,

is that there's this conveyor belt with everything going by,

and you can pick and choose anytime you want,

and you're always getting to see the new.

And I can't say one's better or worse, it's just different.

Most of the time when I'm listening to music, I'm doing something else.

I'm cooking, I'm walking, I'm working out, maybe I'm showering even.

Do you think that that's the wrong way to listen to music?

It's a way, there is no wrong way.

I know that if I'm listening to something,

I listen to music all day while I'm doing other things, it's not focused listening.

And that's fine.

And sometimes through that, I'll hear a piece of music come on, that basically it's wallpaper, and then, whoa, what is that?

What is that?

And then I'll shazam, or I do a lot of research,

we're looking for the playlist for the station,

what's playing at this time?

I always take a picture of like, what time is this playing?

I've had my office call the station and ask what was playing at this time.

So I do find things when I'm not looking for them in that way.

I'm not doing research, I'm just listening casually and something jumps out at me.

I like that experience.

Let's talk a little bit about the cultural moment that we're in and the way that it's affecting art.

You in your career have worked on intentionally, artistically provocative art.

What is the value to a society of intentionally provocative art, or intentionally provocative music?

If the artist is feeling intentionally provocative, if something that's going on in society is sparking them to be provocative, then it has to exist.

That's how it works.

It's like we talk about the things that are going on in our lives.

That's how it works.

You write the following in your book.

As artists, our mission is not to fit in or conform to popular thinking.

Our purpose is to value and develop our understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

Many artists, writers, certainly journalists over the past few years,

have come out and said, sometimes anonymously,

that there's a climate of fear right now in America around being offensive,

that is robbing the world of, I don't necessarily want to say good art,

I know you don't think about it that way, but of risk taking, let's say, in art.

Do you think we're living in a period of particular sensoriousness?

Does it remind you of any prior periods?

Yes, I've experienced this energy a lot.

In the early days, when I lived in New York,

I was part of the first populist uprising in New York in the late 80s,

and we called it hip-hop.

And it was shunned and hated by the mainstream.

It was canceled.

The powers that be tried to cease its existence.

And now it's become the most popular form of music in the world.

And I would have never predicted that, could have never predicted that.

I just know I liked it, and my friends who liked it liked it.

That's all I knew about it.

What was the response of the artists who were being condemned,

basically canceled before there was such a thing as canceling?

What was their response, and what was your response as that kind of criticism was coming in?

Was it defiance?

Well, I was always protective of the artist.

Regardless of whether I agreed with the artist or not,

it has nothing to do with what they believe versus what I believe.

I'm for someone freely stating what they believe.

I support that.

And I worked with some rap groups who said some horrible things.  
I don't necessarily share those beliefs with them.  
I don't even know how they really felt about it.  
Like a group that I worked with called the ghetto boys,  
they invented what would be called horror rap.  
This was on the heels of gangster rap, where it was like gangster rap,  
but more like a horror movie.  
And in the same way that I support people making horror movies,  
I don't go to see those.  
I don't like those kind of things.  
I don't like seeing violence.  
I don't like seeing any movie with guns in it.  
I probably don't like.  
I just don't like that.  
But when Johnny Cash talks about dealio, dealio, dealio all my life,  
if I hadn't shot poor dealio, I'd have her for my wife.  
Dealio is gone.  
So there's a romantic vision in music.  
There has always been in music where violence in music is part of,  
that's one of the themes that comes up.  
It's what all the blues music is all based on.  
Heartbreak, death, the river overflowing, destroying the fields.  
There's a long lineage of these stories.  
And I'm supportive of people telling the stories that are interesting to them,  
whatever they are.  
And if you're not interested, great, change the channel, listen to something else.  
Again, because I support them, I'm not saying this is what I listen to.  
I support the right for it to exist.  
And I support the right for it to exist in its best way.  
The best version of it.  
I want to hear the best version of it.  
I love the idea that great horror movies are made.  
I don't watch them.  
But I like the idea that there's a genre that keeps unfolding and going further.  
How important is the virtue of courage to being a great artist?  
I think it's one of the key pieces because, first of all,  
you have to be courageous enough to get up and do it in the first place.  
So it takes some amount of ego and courage to do whatever it is that you do publicly.  
That's the first level of it.  
And then to do what you truly believe in,  
especially if what you really believe in is different than what other people believe in,  
it takes great courage.  
And most of the great art, at the time that it came out, was originally frowned upon or vilified.  
There's a book that was put out by Rolling Stone that had every article about Neil Young

that was ever printed in Rolling Stone.

And it had every album review and every story.

And then you read it and it's like the review for After the Gold Rush,

terrible album, Neil Can't Sing, the band's no good, the song's no good, the work, nothing good.

And then a few pages later, Best Albums of the Decade, After the Gold Rush, top five.

It's insane. Even within the same publication, there is no consensus on what's good or not.

And anyone who deems themselves the arbiter of consensus,

that's a very crazy egomaniacal position to be in.

The idea that I know what's best for you, that's insane.

Do you think there's any role for criticism or do you just disregard all criticism of the kind that you're describing?

Well, it's nice to hear what people think.

It tells us more about the critic than it does about the artist.

So through criticisms like you go to see a movie with your friends, you talk about it after, that's criticism.

One of the things that the internet has changed is the way that musicians and artists more generally and just people respond to criticism when it's amplified online.

And it's changing the actual music.

So last summer, Beyoncé changed the lyrics to one of her songs, Renaissance,

because the song contained the word spaz, which a lot of people online argued was a kind of slur.

Lizzo pulled the same lyric from one of her songs after a similar backlash.

Going back in time, Taylor Swift had a lyric about being gay.

She changed it.

The Black Eyed Peas released that song that we all think of as Let's Get It Started.

And I didn't know this.

It was called Let's Get Retarded.

Do you think that sort of retroactively editing your music in this way to suit the critics online undermines the art?

Absolutely.

It's fine for them not to like it.

It's fine for them to hate it, it's fine for them never to listen to that artist again.

But the artist already told you how they see it.

To change what you do for them, it's odd.

It's odd.

It's like if you write a story and then the audience says,

we would like the story to be different than the story you wrote.

It's odd.

You know, everything that we make in some way is a form of a diary entry.

No one knows what's in my diary.

You can't write my diary entry.

It's insane.

It's a crazy idea.

So art is a, it's a, it's, this is how I see what I'm seeing.

I might be being sarcastic.

I might be making a joke.  
I might be dead serious.  
There's no way to know that.  
That's part of the fun is that we don't really know.  
We don't really know anything.  
It's when we start thinking, we know that the whole system breaks down  
because we know so little, so little.  
And if we embrace that lack of knowledge,  
then we have power because anything's possible.  
We get to see, we're surprised all the time when something comes through or doesn't come through.  
But when you invest yourself in the outcome of something  
and then it proves some way to be different than you thought,  
it's no way to live.  
Welcome the changes.  
Be excited by what happens in the next scene.  
Be surprised.  
And it's hard when, when it's painful, you know, your friend of mine  
sent me a message the other day asked if I could talk  
and I called them back and they were going through an issue of heartbreak  
and just wanted to talk about it.  
And in the moment, it's really hard to process these feelings that come up.  
And for those of us who've gone through any of these things  
or suffered with depression,  
you get to see that sometimes these things that we think of as bad things  
were the thing that had to happen to allow this great thing to happen  
that would have never happened had the bad thing not happened.  
And sometimes when something really that we perceive is really great happens,  
we think it's great and then the outcome ends up being bad.  
So we don't know anything.  
It's all just information.  
It's like enjoy the movie, enjoy the ride,  
play the part that you want to play in that movie.  
That's it.  
The other thing that's a little strange about our moment is that  
there's been a collapsing of the distinction between the work and the maker  
or the art and the artists.  
A lot of the things that were incredible that I love were made by some kind of bad, creepy people.  
How do you deal with that or do you just dismiss that question entirely?  
I don't think they have anything to do with each other.  
I think that humans are imperfect.  
Humans are fallible.  
And if we look at gurus, so many of the yoga teachers and gurus,  
they're put on this pedestal of peace and love and then they get me too.  
And we forget humans are humans.

## [Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Rick Rubin Says Trust Your Gut, Not Your Audience

The relationship between the teachings and the human are two different things.  
If you make beautiful art and you love the art and the person in real life is despicable, don't hang out with the despicable person, but that has nothing to do with the art.  
And that's up to you.  
And you can also say, you know what, I heard he's despicable. I don't want to look at that.  
That's fine. You get to decide that.  
It's all, to me, they're unconnected.  
The work is not a reflection of you.  
It may be your diary entry.  
It may be how you see the world, but you don't represent it and it doesn't represent you.  
It's different than that.  
It's outside of you.  
It's beyond criticism, the art.  
You can criticize it, but it's beyond criticism.  
It doesn't matter.  
You either like it or you don't.  
It has nothing to do with them.  
I don't like this art because the painter likes cheese.  
What does that have to do with the painting?  
After the break, a lightning round with Rick Rubin including his single pair of shoes, his favorite Beastie Boy song, and why the Beatles are proof of the existence of God.  
We'll be right back.  
Rick Rubin, let's end with a brief lightning round.  
I'm going to ask you some very specific questions that people wrote in and wanted me to ask you.  
I'll do my best.  
Do you own a pair of shoes is the first question?  
I do.  
It depends what you mean by shoes, but yes.  
What do you mean by shoes?  
I have a pair of crocs right now.  
That's your only shoe?  
Yes.  
What is the best Beastie Boy song ever?  
They have so many good songs.  
The first one that comes to mind is Sabotage.  
I really like Sabotage.  
Someone really just wanted to thank you for your remix of We Will Rock You.  
Wow, that's a good one. Thank you.  
I love hearing that.  
Someone really wanted to know what your thoughts are about producing Black Sabbath's album 13.  
Did you enjoy the experience?  
It was a dream come true.  
Does being an artistic genius require some sense of insanity or suffering?  
It's not required, but it does help.

## [Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Rick Rubin Says Trust Your Gut, Not Your Audience

Why does it help?

Reality tells us what we can't do.

And if we can escape reality, we can do the impossible.

If you could put together your ultimate dream album, what genre would it be and what would it be titled?

I don't like all different kinds of music.

My favorite album wouldn't be a genre-specific album or every one that I liked would be, but they would all be different.

A lot of people have an idea about what their last meal on Earth would be.

It's a fun parlor game.

Do you have that equivalent for music?

Debussy's Claire DeLune.

I would choose that.

Do you have a favorite movie soundtrack?

I listen to movie soundtracks as soundtracks, but I love the music in the Sergio Leone Westerns.

I think that's great.

You're famously obsessed with the WWE.

How are politics like wrestling?

It's all the same. Everything's fake.

And it's not just politics. It's everything.

Everything we see, there's an ongoing story, and then there's what really is happening.

We never know where the line between reality and the story is.

What book are you reading right now?

Right now, I'm reading The Timeless Way of Building, Christopher Alexander.

And I just finished Quentin Tarantino's Cinema Speculation, which was spectacular.

Will you lose your powers like Samson if you cut off your beard?

I hope we never find out.

Rick Rubin, last question.

You've said that the Beatles are proof of the existence of God.

Why?

They're four boys from the country.

Living in the United States, we don't understand where the Beatles came from.

I got to work with Mick Jagger at one point in time, and he grew up in London, and he said, you have to understand where the Beatles came from is the middle of nowhere.

The Stones didn't take the Beatles seriously at first because of where they were from.

It's like, how could it be good if it's coming from this middle of nowhere place?

Nothing good comes from Liverpool.

The fact that these four people with these incredible talents that balance each other in a way that you can't even fathom how important each of the four is, that they find themselves as children, that there's footage from that time, from the time that they met, and everything that happened, that the world has changed since them.

The world is not the same since the Beatles.

They had bigger impact on the world than any musical group,

## [Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Rick Rubin Says Trust Your Gut, Not Your Audience

and maybe there are more books written about the Beatles than any subject other than Jesus Christ. The most written about the Beatles are second.

I'll tell you one more thing, even though it's a lightning round, but it's an interesting piece of information.

When I was doing research for the McCartney 321 project that I did, I spoke to a guy named Mark Lewisen, who's one of the true Beatles experts. He just wrote the first of a three-volume history of the Beatles.

He's written many books about the Beatles, but he's written the sort of definitive biography of the Beatles,

and he wrote the first book, which is a thousand pages, and he hasn't even got to their first album yet.

Super well researched.

He said that he heard me say that about the Beatles being proof of the existence of God, and he said, I just want to say I'm not a believer.

I'm going to start by saying I'm not a believer.

And in my research for the Beatles, I have to say so many things went right that seemed impossible, one after another, after another, after another, where it's not believable.

The story is not a believable story.

So he said, well, I'm not a believer.

The story doesn't make sense. It's too much.

It's unbelievable.

Rick Rubin, I want to thank you so much for being here today. It's been a real pleasure.

Same. Thank you too.

Thanks for listening. If you like what you heard, check out Rick Rubin's book, *The Creative Act, A Way of Being*.

You could also go to, and this is a long one, Tetragrammaton, T-E-T-R-A-G-R-A-M-M-A-T-O-N dot com to check out Rick's newest project.

And as always, if you like what you heard and you want to support honestly, there's just one way to do it.

That's by going to thefp.com, T-H-E-F-P dot com, and becoming a subscriber today. See you next time.