

Poetry Performance by JJJJerome Ellis - 3Play Media

[00:00:00.29] KELLY MAHONEY: Welcome, and thank you for joining us for another day of Access 2024. My name is Kelly Mahoney, and I'm on the marketing team here at 3Play Media. Just a brief self-description, I'm a young white woman in my 20s with my red-brown hair pulled back in a clip, and I'm wearing a black sweater today.

[00:00:16.77] So with that, I'd like to officially welcome you all to this special segment highlighting the work of JJJJerome Ellis. Unfortunately, JJJJerome wasn't able to join us live today, but we were encouraged to share their work, which we're very, very excited to do. Today, we'll share an interview excerpt from the podcast Proud Stutter featuring JJJJerome Ellis, as well as a recording of his work.

[00:00:40.55] JJJJerome is a disabled Grenadian Jamaican American animal artist and person who stutters. Through music, performance, writing, video, and photography, the artist asks what stuttering can teach us about justice. You may notice JJJJerome's name spelt with 5 Js. For this artist, it's an ongoing practice in recognition of the word he stutters on most frequently, his name.

[00:01:08.42] Concepts that organize JJJJerome's practice include unknowing, improvisation, prayer, contradiction, unpredictability, interruption, and silence. Ellis researches relationships among Blackness, disabled speech, divinity, nature, sound, and time. Their body of work includes contemplative soundscapes, ambient jazz, and spoken word albums, and music video poems that seek to transfigure archival documents.

[00:01:38.71] Their debut album, *The Clearing*, released in 2021, was called an astonishing, must-listen project by *The Guardian* and awarded the Anna Rabinowitz prize by the Poetry Society of America in 2022. In the interview that we're about to listen to, the Proud Stutter podcast invites JJJJerome to talk about the inspiration and creative process behind this album. Proud Stutter was founded by Maya Chupkov, who hosts alongside Cynthia Chin in this episode.

[00:02:11.84] As a woman who stutters, Maya is shifting societal norms around stuttering by using her platform to lift the voices of those with speech diversities. We unfortunately only have time to play a part of the full interview today, but if you're interested in listening to the complete conversation we encourage you to visit the Proud Stutter website. We'll drop a link in the chat, where you can also access the podcast transcript. So without further ado, please enjoy.

[00:02:37.94] [AUDIO PLAYBACK]

[00:02:38.91] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:02:49.63] - I'm Maya Chupkov, and I'm a woman who stutters.

[00:02:52.42] - And I'm Cynthia Chin, Maya's longtime friend, and I know nothing about stuttering.

[00:02:57.08] - And this is Proud Stutter, a podcast about stuttering and embracing verbal diversity in an effort to change how we talk about it one conversation at a time. Welcome back to Proud Stutter, and welcome to part 2 of our interview with JJJJerome Ellis, musician and artist and a person who stutters.

[00:03:25.34] He just came out with an album titled The Clearing, and in part two, we go more into the album and what Cynthia and I noticed about the album. And it's a really great conversation, and we hope you enjoy it.

[00:03:46.18] - I think something that's really unique about your album is all the talk that you have about intersectionality. I think, oftentimes, in conversations about race and ableism and anything else, we find it really hard to incorporate anything else. I think it's hard for us to really imagine a conversation that allows for us to consider multiple things, and I think that you do that really well.

[00:04:12.90] And everything that you're talking about, these topics are very complicated, Blackness and stuttering and time and space and music. So I think the way that you have connected all of those topics in your mind, I think, it parallels really well with the way that we communicate orally. We have to formulate our thoughts, these very complex thoughts, and then we have to translate that into spoken word. So how did you go about that process, translating all of those very complex topics and intersectionality, and then translating that into poetry that people could understand?

[00:04:51.13] - As you were talking, I was thinking of the Audre Lorde quote about, that Audre Lorde says we don't live single-issue lives. And I really take that to heart that, as you said, race, there can be so much that-- so much good that can come from not talking or thinking about race as a single issue, but thinking about race as it is inflected by and inflects all these other forms of difference.

[00:05:29.46] So The Clearing, the album and the book, began as an essay. I have several aims. One is to bring things into conversation, to bring them into contact. I tell-- I retell this Bernie Mac joke about a young Black boy who stutters, and to me, that was an example of an intersection between Blackness and stuttering.

[00:05:55.76] But then you set that next to the narrative from a formerly enslaved ancestor who describes a narrative where the Angel Gabriel comes to the formerly enslaved ancestor and describes how they will-- their stammering tongue will be loosed. And so these two, to me, examples of Blackness and stuttering in conversation, placed next to each other, so that was one method I used.

[00:06:25.20] Another method was to engage in more academic theoretical language as a way of trying to parse out some of the relationships between these things. So for example, when thinking about Blackness and music, there are so many things to talk about with Blackness and music, but one of the things I wanted to focus on was the way that the historian Saidiya Hartman describes the coffle when Africans who were being brought to the auction block to be sold into slavery, the way those Africans were forced to play instruments and to sing.

[00:07:12.89] And so at this very specific historical knot of Blackness and music, then I talk about that very briefly. So it felt like the essay was, in some ways, a mosaic of these instances of these different fields coming into contact.

[00:07:37.90] - I did want to get back to track eight because there's one part of that track that really struck me, and it's when you say, do not edit me. And it struck me because, as I'm doing the podcast, and as we're making decisions of where to edit, it's always been very important for me to keep my stutter as part of the podcast, obviously.

[00:08:14.05] But at the same time, I don't want to put pressure on myself to stutter, so it's this weird thing because, normally, I'm trying not to stutter. But then sometimes, in my podcast, I'm just letting go so much of that pressure that is built up throughout the day.

[00:08:36.09] - I find it so interesting, what you're saying about releasing from the pressures of the day not to stutter and also not wanting to put pressure on yourself to stutter. I find it-- that's something I'm really fascinated by with stuttering, how there's this elusive quality I find, that it's like, sometimes when I want to stutter, when I'm on stage, and I want to celebrate the stutter, then sometimes it doesn't appear.

[00:09:08.96] And so I've been trying to think about, well, so there's involuntary stuttering, which feels like the way it usually manifests, as that the person who stutters doesn't have control over it. And then there's this other technique, voluntary stuttering, which I find very philosophically very interesting because, if you voluntarily stutter, are you faking it?

[00:09:30.52] But I think-- so there's these two terms, and then what I'm trying to do is think about it in a third way, through this old word. There's this old word I encountered that is-- it's grallatory, G-R-A-L-L-A-T-O-R-Y, and it refers to wading birds, like herons, egrets.

[00:09:58.17] So I've been like, well, what might a grallatory stutter be like as a way of thinking about-- because I've been thinking about the way that herons, they'll just stand and wait for a fish to come. And I've like spent so much time this year just watching herons do that. And I've been like, well, I wonder if there's a way of thinking about stuttering that's not strictly involuntary, and it's not strictly voluntary, but that it involves some kind of waiting.

[00:10:26.60] Yeah, it's been interesting in the last few years, talking with people, doing interviews here and there, and being very clear with them that I don't want them to edit out my stutter, including with This American Life, that I was very clear with them that I want it to be edited out. So I'm really glad that resonated with you. Thank you.

[00:10:48.04] I sometimes forget about that line because it's kind of short. It's a short, kind of simple sentence, but I'm really glad that it's in there.

[00:10:59.29] - I was very explicit, too, when I did the interview with NPR. I was like, yeah, you need to include my stutter, and they did, and it was beautiful. And I was so proud of my stutter in that moment because it was like-- because other people who stutter might hear that and think, oh, wow, she stuttered. That's like me, and if she can do it, I can do it, too.

[00:11:32.74] I really want to ask this question, but it's kind of complicated, so bear with me. When I listened to your album a second time, I understood why I thought listening to the first track the first time, I was thinking, in my head, oh, I didn't really hear you stutter.

[00:11:56.78] And I initially thought your blocks were just part of the music and blending, and then in track two, you talk about how you never really know if it's a block, or if it's an intention to-- it's part of the music, or is it really just me blocking. So I'm wondering, was that your intention with saying that and talking more about your stutter in track two, and then leaving track one kind of like a mystery?

[00:12:31.67] - Yeah, Maya, I just wanted to say I noticed the exact same thing.

[00:12:34.87] - [LAUGHING] Yeah, I love this question. No one's asked me this before. Definitely, that was intentional.

[00:12:42.17] Yeah, I mean, so much of what I find so beautiful about the stutter is the mystery and all the mysteries. I feel it holds so many mysteries, and I want to try to honor a few of those on the album. And one of the ones I wanted to honor was, yeah, not revealing it right up at the front.

[00:13:01.82] And I wanted the listener to be in a state of unknowing. Why is this pause happening? Is it intentional? Is it not intentional? Is there something wrong with the microphone?

[00:13:13.40] I just find that state of unknowing so important because I think there's so much of that in life, that even when I approach a tree or something-- and some trees, I can identify, like I'm like, that's an oak tree. But some, I don't know what they are, and I think there's-- sometimes, I approach a tree, and I don't know what kind of tree it is. And I'm like-- and I have the impulse to take out my phone and use the plant app and take a picture of the leaf and identify it.

[00:13:46.16] But sometimes, I'm like, no, let me just stand and just be in front of the unknown, of my ignorance and my not knowing what-- and my not being able to grasp this truth, my name, because I find part of what so much I'm interested, too, is with the word "stutter."

[00:14:10.02] To many people, it means so many different things, but part of my experience as a person who stutters is because the glottal block is not as common in certain media. I grew up watching Porky Pig, who repeats his syllables a lot, but he doesn't really glottal block. And the King's Speech doesn't really do that. Biden doesn't really do that.

[00:14:34.81] And so part so much of my experience, including on the phone so often, is somebody-- I feel like if, on the phone, if I were repeating the first syllable of a book title, then they would be less likely to hang up because they would hear, and they might be like, oh, he's stuttering right now.

[00:14:51.42] But because the glottal block so often sounds silent, I experience this so often, just as a daily fact in my life, is that people often don't know what's happening. And it's been so

painful for so many years, but gradually, I've been able to be like, that not knowing, there's something important there.

[00:15:14.90] And there's this book that really means a lot to me called *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and it's from the Middle Ages, and it's by a monk. And it's a book largely about prayer, but it talks about how we can approach God through knowledge, and we can approach God through love, and that the approaching God through love ultimately brings us closer to God. And we often have to leave knowledge behind, and I think about that a lot.

[00:15:52.64] That track one, that somebody might be in a state of uncertainty, and even be uncomfortable because they're like, what's happening. And I find that really important, as opposed to opening the album and saying, hey, I speak with a stutter, so here's what's going on, and then going--

[00:16:10.01] So then yeah, it was intentional that, in track two, then I reveal a bit more, so that then the listener gets an analogous experience to what happens in track four with the bookseller because the bookseller also doesn't know what's happening.

[00:16:27.32] And what I find so interesting is that, so often, the person on the other end, it feels like, they think they-- there seems to be a great confidence that, sometimes, it feels like the thought process is like, well, I don't hear any sound. I'm going to say hello a few times. I think the most likely scenario is that the line is dropped, which is very reasonable. But it's just not true. It's not what's happening.

[00:16:52.31] And so then it becomes a question of epistemology, too, just how-- when do we think we know what we know, but we don't actually know? And I think the stutter just holds that so beautifully. So it was very intentional, yeah, and I'm really glad to hear you both have that experience because I was like, it's a little risky to confuse the listener, but I really thought it was important.

[00:17:22.99] - Thank you for approaching it that way. I think it was very well executed. And the last question I have about the album-- and then we have just a few quick closing questions. But my next question about your album is around track six. This is where you also introduce Milta, and I just loved how she explained your stuttering as a form of ancestral wisdom. Yeah, I was just blown away, and I'm just wondering, if you can kind of just go more into your relationship with your mentor.

[00:18:07.45] - So right now, she has undergone an initiation, and so her name currently is Yahwah Milta, but at the time, her name was Milta. And yeah, I met her in 2019, I think, in New York when I was working on a wonderful work of theater and performance called *Reconstruction* with a company called *The Team*. And Yahwah Milta is a long time anti-racist organizer.

[00:18:48.39] And yeah, just as we got to know each other, she would just say things to me about how my stutter struck her, and she-- in her spiritual practice, she has a really strong connection with the ancestors, and she told me about that.

[00:19:12.73] And so then when I wrote the abstract for the essay that this work is based on, I sent the abstract to her and the rest of the company, and what she reads on track six was her response to reading the abstract, where I was already talking about Blackness, stuttering, and music together.

[00:19:30.07] So yeah, and it's just really important for me in the album to have these three phone calls, the bookseller part one, part two, and then with Yahwah Milta, because Yahwah Milta, to me, I wanted to include hers because it's an example of a phone call where, one, I don't need to disclose the stutter. She already knows about it.

[00:19:51.36] And two, where I feel totally safe stuttering, and where it's a conversation that is so healing, and many of our conversations between she and I are so healing. So I really wanted to have a progression of phone calls from one that is, where I get interrupted in a way, two, where I don't get interrupted, but I have to disclose, and then, three, where it's just a bath of just care and wisdom.

[00:20:28.72] So yeah, I'm so grateful that-- and I told her, I asked her, I was like, can you record what you wrote to me for this album I'm working on? And she was very happy to, and then we-- and then I recorded that phone call. So yeah, I'm so, so, so grateful to her.

[00:20:46.75] And yeah, in the album and the book, I tried to present a multiplicity of viewpoints on stuttering, so there's my viewpoint, but there's also Yahwah Milta's viewpoint, and there's Bernie Mac's viewpoint. And try to present a bit of a kaleidoscope.

[00:21:17.29] - That's beautiful. And so as we wrap up, I did want to ask and leave our listeners who are curious what you're working on next, and what can we expect from you? Yeah, so if you can talk about what's next for you, and also, are you planning to do any live performances at all? I don't know. That might-- that was a question that kind of came to me.

[00:21:53.29] - Yeah, I'm definitely doing live performances. I'll be doing performing in Philadelphia March 15 and Savannah, Georgia, February 10. The Savannah one will be focused on The Clearing. I'll be performing in Europe in April and May, various places. New York City, I think, in February a bit.

[00:22:16.06] But I'm looking to tour more with The Clearing, so if any of your listeners are interested in hosting an event or something like that, I'm really interested. And I love engaging with people with the work.

[00:22:30.53] And then what I'm working on, yeah, so I'm working on the essay, as I mentioned earlier, where I'm trying to think about stuttering by thinking about herons and wading birds in general. That'll be for an anthology of essays on-- or a collection of essays about bodies and performance.

[00:22:54.16] And then I'm working on a book, a next book, where I'm-- book, series of performances, music-- it's all a very hybrid project, like The Clearing-- that is focused on archives of advertisements from newspapers in the 18th and 19th Centuries, that are

advertisements for enslaved people who have run away from those who believe that they are their masters.

[00:23:26.59] And it's a work of poetry, a following in the tradition of the poet M NourbeSe Philip, her book *Zong!* where she creates a book of poetry by rearranging and creating anagrams from the words of a legal case about an 18th century massacre of Africans on a ship. And so in this project, I'm creating poems and songs by rearranging words in the advertisements.

[00:23:56.85] And there's a subset of these advertisements for enslaved ancestors who stutter, so it's a way of further thinking about Black history and stuttering together. For example, there's a line from one of the pieces that is-- it goes, a stutter is an occasion to be present in complex thought, and the line is formed entirely from words or fragments of words from the advertisement.

[00:24:33.75] The word "complex" comes from the word "complexion" because the advertisement describes the complexion of the enslaved ancestor who ran away. "Occasion" comes from a sentence that I believe it's talking about a scar on the ancestor that was occasioned by a lash, I believe.

[00:24:57.04] And so all the words are taken from the ad, and so then new language arises. These images arise that I might not have arrived at had I not been restricting myself to these documents, and the documents seem to be-- they are documents of violence, but also documents of escape and resistance.

[00:25:27.72] - Wow, sounds like you have quite a busy year ahead, and we are very much looking forward to following you along and following your work. We will be sure to include the shows that JJJJerome mentioned in our show notes, so be sure to check that out, and if you haven't done so, we highly, highly recommend listening to JJJJerome's new album *The Clearing*.

[00:25:56.07] Thank you so much, JJJJerome, for being with us. It was such a rich conversation, and I am going to be thinking about all the things we talked about for a long time. And that's it for Proud Stutter. Thank you all, and see you next time.

[00:26:14.64] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:26:18.34] And that's it for this episode. I'm Maya.

[00:26:21.27] - And I'm Cynthia.

[00:26:22.69] - And you've been listening to Proud Stutter. This episode of Proud Stutter was produced by me, Maya Chupkov.

[00:26:29.91] - And edited by me, Cynthia Chin. Our music was composed by Augusto Denise, and our artwork by Mara Ezekiel and Noah Chupkov.

[00:26:38.73] - If you have an idea or want to be part of future episodes, find us on Twitter, at @ProudStutter. You can also find us at www.proudstutter.com.

[00:26:52.26] - Drop us a note or share a voice memo. What's your stuttering story? What topics would you like us to cover, and what are you curious about?

[00:26:59.43] - And if you like the show, you can leave us a review wherever you are listening to this podcast.

[00:27:05.58] - More importantly, tell your friends to listen, too.

[00:27:08.85] - Until we meet again, thanks for listening. Be proud and be you.

[00:27:16.96] [END PLAYBACK]

[00:27:20.24] KELLY MAHONEY: All right, thank you, everyone, for listening. I think that was a really insightful conversation. I love hearing about the way that JJJJerome thinks about the world, especially the mystery of the tree analogy. I loved that.

[00:27:34.14] So now that we've gotten a glimpse inside of JJJJerome's creative process and a little bit of his inspiration, we'd like to show a recorded performance titled Life of Life. The runtime of this video is just under eight minutes, and it will include burned in captions, also known as open captions. We've also dropped a link in the chat to a version of the performance that includes audio description if anyone would prefer to view that. This performance was originally presented for the 2020 virtual event Looking for Language in the Ruins, hosted by the Center for African-American Poetry and Poetics. Please enjoy, and please be patient while I get the window set up for you.

[00:28:12.11] [VIDEO PLAYBACK]

[00:28:13.80] (SINGING) Stoppage, thence passage

[00:28:19.23] Thence stoppage, thence passage

[00:28:24.12] Thence stoppage, thence passage

[00:28:29.98] Thence stoppage, thence passage

[00:28:36.65] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:28:52.27] I believe

[00:28:58.68] I believe in impediment

[00:29:05.68] I believe in the immediate

[00:29:14.64] I believe in giving away impediment

[00:29:23.46] I believe in also-- he has a black crab in his speech

[00:29:40.62] The crab has lost

[00:29:47.95] The crab secures proof of being above if the above

[00:30:12.20] Being is impediment

[00:30:17.30] Being is apprehended

[00:30:22.79] Being is bushy

[00:30:26.75] Being is a chronicle

[00:30:38.52] Years apprehending the fire

[00:31:03.57] I am last, not lost

[00:31:08.78] Impediment is a sawyer in the bay

[00:32:03.68] The northward horse

[00:32:16.55] In a chariot of coffee

[00:32:27.31] The the reward shall scar that demand

[00:32:40.22] Where is the hose

[00:32:55.80] Where is the horse

[00:33:00.18] Where is the goal of the law of speech

[00:33:17.91] The law pretends to stutter

[00:33:26.61] The law pretends to stutter

[00:33:44.62] The stutter is coffee for the runaways

[00:33:48.99] The stutter is rewarded

[00:33:51.68] The stutter is passage

[00:33:55.82] The stutter is a high charity

[00:34:00.51] The stutter is a scar on speech

[00:34:06.60] The stutter is a house for speech

[00:34:12.32] The stutter is a horse for speech

[00:34:53.72] The stutter has run away from any government

[00:35:15.12] Stoppage thence passes, thence stoppage, thence passage

[00:35:20.58] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:35:47.13] [END PLAYBACK]

[00:35:48.61] KELLY MAHONEY: It's so beautiful, you almost don't want it to end. I think the contrast of the woman in a box versus the saxophone free was really, really interesting. So I'm, again, very thankful that we had this opportunity to share this content.

[00:36:07.51] Thank you to Jerome for the opportunity to showcase your work. Another thank you to Proud Stutter for allowing the use of your clip featuring Jerome. And a thank you to Maya and Cynthia for the work that they're doing with the podcast.

[00:36:20.16] On screen, as well as in the chat, we're providing links that make it easy for you to explore more work by both Jerome and Proud Stutter. You can visit Jerome's website and learn more about their wonderful variety of work at jjjjjerome.com. You Can. Also find Jerome's musical work on Spotify and Apple Music. And finally, you can visit Proud Stutter's website at www.proudstutter.org.

[00:36:53.46] That's all for today's special segment. Thank you everyone for joining us today.