

This is Studio Radicals with dCS Audio.

Kate Hutchinson: Welcome back to Studio Radicals, a new podcast series that meets the musical visionaries who are shaping the sounds of today. I'm your host, Kate Hutchinson. I'm a journalist and broadcaster, and over 8 episodes I'll be meeting some truly innovative minds, from leading producers and composers, to engineers and pioneers. Today we're in Los Angeles with Ebonie Smith, an engineer turned artist whose output ranges from laying down Broadway musicals to recording poetry with leading cultural figures and working with some of the biggest names in R&B, hip-hop and pop. Up until recently – and at the time of our interview – Ebonie was a senior producer at Atlantic Records, where she gave her Midas touch to the stars that came through the doors. There, she contributed to huge albums like Cardi B's *Invasion of Privacy* and Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer*. Whatever she's working on, she brings her own unique style to the table each time.

Ebonie Smith: The Ebonie Smith sound is unorthodox, it's moody. It's a lot to do with soundscapes and it's not trying to be pop. It's serious, and it's cerebral.

Kate Hutchinson: She grew up immersed in music in Memphis, but when she moved to New York in the early-2000s to study music production, she became inspired by the city's hip-hop culture, and started making her own beats. Ebonie is an avid student of the *Billboard* Hot 100 but her work is always searching for the deeper threads that link Black artistry across the generations.

Ebonie Smith: Art for me is not just about charts. You know, I wish I could just be chasing hits. But I've never been that kind of artist, like I really am focused on how record-making can actually be used to heal communities and can be used as a means of elevating consciousness.

Kate Hutchinson: Ebonie is now freelance and runs Gender Amplified, the non-profit arts organisation she started back in 2007, while at college, to help more women and gender-expansive individuals into music production. In 2024, Ebonie released an album of collaborations called *On Imagination*, featuring 12 poems performed by legendary Black American women. They included Angela Davis and a very special session that Ebonie recorded with the late soul great, Roberta Flack.

Ebonie Smith: I love to be in my own lane doing things completely out of order. I've seen how the order is supposed to go, I've done that for years and years working with some of the greatest producers on the planet. And then you go, OK, well, can I subvert this?

Kate Hutchinson: In this episode of Studio Radicals, Ebonie talks about how working on theatre soundtracks set the tone for her career; what it was like in the booth with some of the greatest thinkers of our times; and what she's learned from studying stand-out songs.

We are in the centre of Hollywood, in Los Angeles, but you grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, which is a huge musical city. Was music always gonna factor into your life in a big way?

Ebonie Smith: I think it was kind of inevitable that I would find my way to music growing up in Memphis. Memphis is a type of place where music is so pervasive, it's everywhere and there's no escaping it. And it's a very huge church culture. And the music tradition in church is so rich in Memphis, and it informs everything else. So many musicians that will play the nightclubs, will also play the churches, and it's just a really robust musical environment.

Kate Hutchinson: Do you have any particular memories of hearing music in the church? I'm just thinking of those amazing gospel choirs and the impact that that must have had on you.

Ebonie Smith: Yeah, you know, I was in the angel choir growing up. I grew up in a Baptist church. So the choir tradition became my first understanding of how to think about music. Apart from the radio, church was the other space where music was so alive. and where I would see live music. And for me, church was the best concert in town and the only concert that I could go to as a child. So one time I actually sang in church, I brought the house down. It was very traumatic for me, because I didn't like the fame of that. Everybody rushing up to you and wanting to touch you and congratulating me on that success, it was just very awkward. And I think that was also the first time I realised that probably I want to do something a little bit more behind the scenes. I didn't really learn about the concept of a music producer until Lauryn Hill's *Miseducation*. That was the record that was like, Oh, there's this whole other aspect of music-making that is not being a musician, it's not necessarily being a vocalist. It's more unseen. It's the person who's behind the scene organising, pulling all the pieces together. In a way I thought she was like Prince. She did everything.

Kate Hutchinson: One of the sort of entrance points for you, it seems like, is when you were in New York studying and you were taking part in these beat battles. What kind of an experience was that and how did that push your production forward?

Ebonie Smith: Right. In a way I was really more on the sidelines at a lot of these events. It was such a vibrant culture, very male, very exuberant, very New York, like in the early 2000s. And it was really fun to just go and watch. These producers were coming from every inch of the city. It was actually when I started meeting a lot of other producers, I started to really understand. And shortly after that, getting inspired at the battles, I was able to begin to concoct a vision of being a producer, and I started buying equipment after that.

Kate Hutchinson: So you were entrenched in this beat-making culture, studying engineering at college, and then going back to your bedroom and making beats. How did you go from that, to where you are now, what was your sort of route in?

Ebonie Smith: You know, I think it was a combination of hustle, luck, my studies. I just finished my master's at NYU in music production and music technology. And I needed a job, so I landed at Sirius XM for a little while as an intern doing radio imaging. That was a great education, putting together the sonic aspects and assets of a channel that make it appealing to the listener. So I learned about that and I was working with independent artists all the time. I built a studio at

my house at that time and I was working for music production and DJ school at the time as well. I had a ton of odd jobs, I was teaching music at the YMCA. And this job came up to work for Atlantic, to come in in a very entry level way to record artists and to also write some editorial. And I was like, I'm all over it, and it was just like the perfect job for me. And I've been here ever since.

Kate Hutchinson: Let's talk about getting creative with some of the soundtrack work that you've done. You've worked and on and produced and engineered a number of musical soundtracks, notably *Hamilton*. What kind of experience was that? That must've been incredible.

Ebonie Smith: *Hamilton* was my very first credit in the music business and I was just elated because it was a, number one, rap album. That was also a hit theatrical work. That was also very studious and scholarly and academic. And in a lot of ways it set the tone because it showed me that I could do and achieve a number of things with music and not really compromise any aspect of my person, right? Like I am scholarly, I am musical, I have a passion for hip-hop and rap, and I could merge all those worlds. And that was my first introduction to a work that had done that. And it also set the tone for me because working with Alex Lacamoire, who was the chief composer, and Tim Latham, who was the chief mixing engineer, and Derik Lee, who was the chief recording engineer, as well as Lin-Manuel. It was the work ethic for me that showed me the difference between the pros, and not the pros.

Kate Hutchinson: How is producing a soundtrack like that different to, say, producing a band?

Ebonie Smith: Producing a soundtrack is a lot different. There's so many additional elements. So the first thing obviously is you're working with union actors, right? So you don't have them all day, every day. You have to be very specific about how much time they spend in the studio, how much time they're recording. There are rules. The second thing is orchestral work is part and parcel to the Broadway experience. So you have to build out your music in a way that the orchestra pit will be able to reproduce it. You have to make sure that some of the sound design elements actually go with what's happening visually. It's kind of like the sonic set design for a much larger artistic experience. Another thing that's important to note is just how long it takes plays to go up. I mean, some plays take a decade to get made, and there's a little bit more time as a result to really get the music the way you want to. So for example, Lin-Manuel spent six years working on the music for *Hamilton*. And then the recording process was lightning speed, but the music, he'd been germinating and building that and refining that over many, many years. So it is really a very unique production world.

Kate Hutchinson: I mean, as first credits go, that one's hard to beat. How does theatricality feature in the rest of your work? Is that something you've carried through?

Ebonie Smith: I like to think I've carried the techniques. For example, working with sheet music, that's really essential to the Broadway experience. I don't find that so much in other genres. But I actually enjoy that part of the composition and printing out lyrics, writing lyrics, and just kind of old school recording because a lot of times songs for Broadway are written in a more traditional

way, right? Like you actually composing a song, writing it, then giving it to the artists, and they're gonna sing it. That used to be how it worked, all the time. Like when you go back to the early days of music publishing, music publishers would hunt for songs, and then they'd bring them to artists, and the artists would just sing it. So I like that kind of old school approach. Plus the sheet music is really nice. It makes you think Gershwin, very Porgy and Bess, very just kind of old school Broadway vibes.

To me it's important to have a routine. So I'm up at 4:30. I journal, and I do prayers, and then I go to the gym, I do piano practice for two to three hours, and I start interviews and meetings and whatever. And I'll work on music, I'll go to the studio if I have a session that day.

Kate Hutchinson: How vital is that piano practice to what you do?.

Ebonie Smith: The piano workouts are critical because they've helped me unlock the mysteries of genre. Studying classical in the ways it is different from jazz, studying jazz in the ways it's different from gospel, studying blues in the ways it's different. And what you find is they're all related. I think genres come out of environment. So where you find a collective of people pretty much galvanised around a particular sound, that sound will become a genre. But the truth of music is that the framework is limited. I mean, everybody's working with the same set of notes. The genre is just how we're speaking. So, the study of composition helps me unlock that synergy or unlock those relationships, but from a composition perspective, it allows me to be very intentional with my choices. So when I think of scales, for example, a scale is the building block of your chords. So I may grab at a different scale depending on what I'm trying to convey. The standard blues scale is going to give you something very different than the standard Mixolydian scale, or your basic major scales. Your chromatic scales are going to give you something different. Building on that musical framework is what allows me to have very intentional conversations with the listener.

Kate Hutchinson: How do you view production?

Ebonie Smith: I view production as the way of dressing up a song. It is the staging. We'll use a Broadway analogy to explain this, right – if you have a really great play and you've paid for money, you're very excited, there's a lot of hype around this play and you go to see it and you sit in your seat and the curtains open and it's just two people sitting there reading the script as if they're doing a table read. You'd want your money back. Take the same play, dress it up with theatrics, with beautiful set design, music. And you go see that, OK, that's a Broadway production, that's worth actually spending the money on, right? The same is true for songs. The production is giving your song the Broadway treatment, right? It's taking a great song, great lyrics that would otherwise just be spoken or sung, and giving them an environment with which to present to the public in a framework that's accessible and kind of lends itself to underscoring the lyric and the melody.

Kate Hutchinson: You seem to be a student of great hits. Can you talk to me a little bit about the aspects that go into making one and how you've studied chart music, pop music, to break down what goes into a massive song?

Ebonie Smith: I think there's no rules when it comes to hits. The lyric is the most important thing, even when the lyric doesn't feel like it's particularly audible or legible, or even in English, right? Sometimes it's just an inflection of a syllable that can make a lyric extremely strong or not strong. A moment of, just, vulnerability that can be heard in emotional content when it comes to love songs. I mean, when you look at the charts right now and the songs that are popular, one thing they all have in common is a very powerful and dynamic lead vocal. So whatever you do right now, at least, sonically, the public seems to be listening again to strong vocals. So your leading melody matters a great deal. And the carrier of that melody is the vocalist and their timbre. And after that, it's about production that is interesting. It's not run of the mill. Right, so you could take a familiar genre and producing it in a way that hasn't been done in a way that actually makes the listener's ear perk a little bit, adding that ear candy, creating breaks, creating moments in the song. That lends itself to addiction, if you will. You want to make people sonically addicted to what you've made. The goal of the hitmaker is to reach every demographic with your song, and that can be a challenge. There's a lot of ways to do that. But that to me, in essence, defines what a hit is.

Kate Hutchinson: I was wondering whether you still dissect hits in the way that I read that you used to. So you used to wake up in the morning and look at what was in the top 40 or in the *Billboard* 100, and studiously listen to all of those songs to see how they worked. That must have taken an awful amount of time.

Ebonie Smith: Yeah, and I still do that. But these days, because I play so much piano in the morning, my focus now has become a little more internal in the sense of bringing out of me what I didn't know was there. I'm still in tune, I still know what the top five tracks are doing and who produced them. And dissecting them for sure. But typically what I'll do now is during my piano practice, I'll go down from the top maybe 100 records, maybe the top top 40, and I'll just play them down while I'm playing, while I'm practicing, just play them down and make sure I know at the very least the song structure. Because I'm so focused in on production, I've realised that it's the song more than the sonics that I'm interested in developing and identifying.

Kate Hutchinson: If you hear that a sound is popular in the charts, how does that factor into your own approach to engineering or producing or songwriting?

Ebonie Smith: I'm always curious about what makes great moments in hit songs, but I'm a terrible mimic. So I just really do my thing taking drums and doing very unusual things with them. Pitching vocals and creating soundscapes with vocals that sound a bit otherworldly. Also, moody piano sounds. I like a production style that utilises a lot of live instrumentation because that's how I like to find my way. You know, being in front of a computer, I can do that. But I don't get my best stuff that way. So, I'm always just wanting to challenge myself.

Kate Hutchinson: A track you produced, 'The Ballad of Sally Anne', featuring the wonderful Rhiannon Giddens, was nominated for a Grammy. How significant was that track and its message to you?

Ebonie Smith: It was incredibly important because it actually speaks of the tale of lynching and the importance of not allowing that conversation to die. It was written by the incomparable Alice Randall, who reached out to me to ask me to produce this full album, this full compilation of songs that she'd written, primarily for country artists in the '90s and '80s, and she wanted to reimagine these songs and I knew it had to be quite a departure and I wanted it to be very haunted. I wanted it to be slightly out of her comfort zone. And I think we achieved something very special with it, because I felt that the track needed to drive what she sent me – she was in Ireland at the time – she sent me these really great vocals and this banjo playing and some percussion. And I really worked hard to turn that into what you hear, which is a bit of a horse out of the stable sound. It really runs. And I think it's important that it runs because this conversation of death, especially in such a haunting way as through lynching, is still so present, it's ever-present in our society. I mean, we think about George Floyd and we think about Trayvon Martin, this conversation is still very current, but it is a conversation that is more aligned with the hip-hop generation too, because of the deaths that are happening in hip-hop, the violence in that space. And I wanted to position the music in a way that is referencing the past and present at the same time. And so I was able to take those artistic liberties, and I'm very thankful to Alice Randall for entrusting me with the music and material. I wanted to think very critically about the type of music that's being created and shared, especially as it pertains to music that represents Black culture. For example, the last project that I did was a Juneteenth poetry album that I put together that had incredible artists on it like Dawn Richard and Roberta Flack's last-ever recording, Valerie Simpson, Valerie June, also had politicians and activists like Angela Davis and Representative Maxine Waters. And this was something I wanted to do in the wake of the death of Takeoff from the Migos. So it's different, you know, I recorded it all, produced it all, mixed it all, found all of the participants who were on it. Had to manage the budget.

Kate Hutchinson: This album is called *On Imagination*. When you say that you came up with the concept in the wake of the death of Takeoff from Migos, what do you mean?

Ebonie Smith: The passing of Takeoff from the Migos had a profound effect on me. And I think it was a cumulative effect because he was one of many musicians that have been shot due to gun violence. I think I was just at the end of my rope with that. I was just a bit tired of seeing that, especially disproportionately affecting hip-hop artists, disproportionately affecting Black male artists. So, Atlantic Records is a label that is these days known for its hip-hop, its contributions in the hip-hop space. So I thought it was a way to build a conversation and to create an alternative conversation around Black art and language perpetuated by Black artists. A respectful way of managing his death for me. I needed a way to navigate it. And when I identified these poems, they were particularly interesting because they were so soothing and so refreshing. The language was, and it was very helpful, for example, there's a Phyllis Wheatley poem on the album called *On the Death of a Young Gentleman*. That made me think of him. Art for me is not just about charts, you know I wish I could just be chasing hits, but I've never been

that kind of artist, like I really am focused on how record-making can actually be used to heal communities and can be used as a means of elevating consciousness.

Kate Hutchinson: You recorded Roberta Flack. I mean, that must have been amazing.

Ebonie Smith: It was, it came together very by chance. She came into the studio in New York City and I was up to bat to engineer. We had a really special moment because we locked eyes immediately and she started speaking to me and she gave me the best advice. She's told me: always be myself. You don't have to be anything else. And she's like, 'Are you recording me?' I was like, 'Yes, ma'am. I'm recording.' And she was like, 'Good. You know, I want you to do it.' I don't know what was going on in her mind, but if I had to guess, I think she was just happy to see a young Black lady there. That's what I'd like to think she thought. And that she wanted to hold me up and give me space by offering me the honour of actually recording her. And it took a while to get the recording done. I spent a lot of time with that vocal, making sure that sonically it sounded to her liking. A lot of back and forth with her team to make sure that she liked what we'd done. She gave an incredible performance that day, and it was her last-ever recording.

Kate Hutchinson: Also in *On Imagination*, the album that you did, it must have been incredible to work with Angela Davis. Not only that, but she decided that she was going to pick her own poem. Can you talk a little bit about that experience of recording somebody as legendary as that? You've spent years recording vocalists, but you were recording an activist this time. How is that different?

Ebonie Smith: Well, first of all, it was an honour. I got a free personalised Angela Davis experience that no one else has. When she walked in, the first thing I noticed is she was instantly in the culture, because she had these Nikes on. Like, the freshest Nikes. I just was like, Oh my god, Angela Davis is... she is the culture. Like instantly I was like, she's hip-hop. When you think about activists from the '60s, when she started really coming to prominence, national prominence, these were kids. And this was the genesis of hip-hop, even though there was no genre. They were speaking out. That's the essence of hip-hop. That's rap, rapping, talking to the people. So she's a rap artist, whether she knows it or not. She's been rapping to us for a long time, and telling us the truth. So when she gets in the booth, I mean, she's an orator and I think that was one of the things that I really appreciated about the project is getting an opportunity to record some of the greatest vocalists. They're not necessarily musicians, but they're excellent vocalists. They understand their voices. And one of the things that I noticed immediately, instantaneously, about her is her sense of pacing. There's someone reciting a poem and then there's Angela Davis reciting *Moving Toward Home* by June Jordan. And that's a whole different ball game, when you're dealing with somebody who has built a life around speaking. The way in which she brings a concept forward, she really made it her own. And I was very particular to not put music in front of people. So she's just in there recording without any instrumentation or without any direction, or meter. She's finding a way within the context of the poem to find the beats. Your job as a producer is to guide the singer with some sort of instrumental roadmap. Poetry record for me, the language, if you will, is the street. And I'm following the vocalists as they're walking down that street. They're leading me wherever they're going. So if people aren't

fixed to a tonal map of any kind or a key, then I can just extract the key from their voices. It's like a little playground for me, the opportunity to produce records in ways that are unorthodox. I love that, I love to be in my own lane doing things completely out of order. I've seen how the order is supposed to go, I've done that for years and years, in-house working with some of the greatest producers on the planet. And then you go, OK, well, can I subvert this? And in subverting it, can I find the Ebonie Smith sound?

Kate Hutchinson: Gender Amplified, which is your nonprofit organization, you founded that in 2007. How has that evolved?

Ebonie Smith: Gender Amplified started off as a thesis turned academic conference turned music festival turned non-profit. That's pretty much the life evolution of it. And now, it's what it is, and we help to produce camps and music, recording music intensives for music producers who are women, who are gender non-conforming, transgender, gender expansive. Mostly in the New York area, but we've started expanding our event series out to Los Angeles, and we're actually releasing records now. I think if there's anything I'm proud of, it's the community we've built. All super talented producers that have been coming to our events since 2019.

Kate Hutchinson: Are you finding more artists and more producers amplifying their engineers and talking about the work that their engineers have contributed?

Ebonie Smith: I do. It's one of the reasons why I am the co-chair of the producers and engineers wing for the Recording Academy. One of my biggest drives is to make sure that through our initiatives we're really shining a spotlight on those persons, because when it comes to Grammy night, it's all about the artists, but these producers, these people behind the scenes are making it possible for those artists to go out and be their best selves, to go out and present their best work, right. It is truly a collaborative effort. It was great to see Taylor Swift bring up Laura Sisk and Jack Antonoff at the Grammys when she won for Album of the Year a few years ago, and I think that was a huge win for the community of artists to see such a prominent artist in public sphere say to the world that it's a group effort.

Kate Hutchinson: So what project is next?

Ebonie Smith: I don't know. I've received some requests to do a couple different things, and I have my own record that I'd like to put out of myself, just as an artist. I have a whole finished record in the can that's another compilation project, that's just kind of waiting on me to put it out. Whatever it is, it's gonna be great, and it's gonna be big.

Kate Hutchinson: What does Ebonie the artist sound like? Can you give us a little insight.

Ebonie Smith: Trying to figure it out. I've been behind the scenes for over a decade, so stepping out as an artist, it's new. But I like it. I like it, I wanna do more. It's going to be some hip-hop. It's going to be some Memphis, it's going to be some gospel. It's going to be queer, you know, it's gonna be all of that...

Kate Hutchinson: How do you separate out all these different identities? As the producer, the engineer, the artist, the beat maker.

Ebonie Smith: In terms of identity, I think for me, it's all been out of necessity, right? So it's all one person. It's one offering, right? I approach everything art from an artist's perspective, I'm just as artsy fartsy about cooking as I am about interior design, right? It's like, I'm just an artist and life is an art piece. And it's all art to me.

Outro: This is Studio Radicals with dCS Audio.

Kate Hutchinson: Thank you for tuning in. This episode starred Ebonie Smith. Studio Radicals is co-produced by dCS Audio and me, Kate Hutchinson, with audio production and editing by Holly Fisher. The theme music is by Anna Prior. Up next, it's Hannah Peel. "I want people to hear the things that are unusual and weird, and question, how is that made? Like, I find that so exciting, that thing of, where does that sound come from, what is that, what is making me feel like that?" Head to dcsaudio.com/studioradicals and you can listen to playlists featuring all of the music we've talked about in the series and hear more episodes too. Subscribe now and don't miss an episode.