**Down to the Struts**

Season 5, Episode 6: Disability and the Creative Process

Host: Qudsiya Naqui

Guest: Michael Williams

Transcript by Qudsiya Naqui

For more information:[www.downtothestruts.com](http://www.downtothestruts.com)

**Introduction**

“If you want the world to notice you, you have to get out in the world to be noticed.”

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Hi, this is Qudsiya Naqui, and welcome to the season five finale of Down to the Struts, the podcast about disability design and intersectionality. Today, we'll listen in on my conversation with Michael Williams. Michael is a member of the International Association of Sight Impaired Artists. He is both a visual artist and a music composer under the name Epic Sound Waves. Michael and I talked about his artistic techniques, what drew him to add electronic music composition to his artistic portfolio, and how his art wound up in the collection of our 44th President. Okay, let's get down to it.

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thank you, Michael, for joining me on the podcast today. I'm really excited to have you I'd love if you could start by introducing yourself and telling us a little bit about what got you interested in art and music.

Michael Williams:

Thank you. It's good to be here. I've been painting since the age of 10. And I will reflect back to the time that I first got involved. Most sons, they would go about selecting on their career choice on based on a father's career. And I took a twist, I decided to take my interest in art based on what my mother does She’s a professional artist as well. And watching her paint her two weeks of red a few months, I decided to take an interest inpainting. And most of the time when you're visually impaired or have some form of low vision or any type of disability, you get that doubt set in but to me it was just like a certainty that was ready to pan out in my head, it was a great way for me to express myself about how I feel and how I see the world. Based on my on my sight. You can say limited vision. But to me, it was a big vision to take on being an artist because most of the world doesn't have a blind or sighted career artists before. And it was something for me to try to pursue. And so I picked up a paintbrush and start drawing and painting cars and aviation. And the next thing you know, I'm getting up to architecture. And I knew then that this was going to be the thing. And of course I did pursue tried to be in the band like my uncle. But I lost interest in that very quickly and back to painting and drawing. And as the story continues on till today,

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's really great. And you had low vision from childhood. Is that right?

Michael Williams:

Correct. I had I had what they call Stargardt's Disease, which is a macular degenerative type of disorder. The funny thing is, I knew I was different. And I knew I couldn't see well. But I was trying to go along as normal as possible. And it's the type of disability that starts when you're a teenager. And it stabilizes itself when you get in your mid 20s. And it's the remains in that set. Pace on what how low your vision is based on a disease, it's never has occurred to me to the fact that I will have something that you would really fear that it would get worse, but it stabilized itself. And I've been able to get around and being as independent as ever, I still can see some. The only problem is that when I do paint, you know most painters are able to tell the difference between blues and greens, but I paint according to how I feel. And I'll just go and roll with the punches as far as taking what colors I feel it's it's best to fit that paint and go with it.

Qudsiya Naqui:

And to that end, could you tell us a little bit about your creative process, the mediums you use, how you go about thinking up a work and working on it and kind of how that process works for you as an artist?

Michael Williams:

of course, of course. Well, when I first got started, I was working with just pencil. And then as I advanced into commercial art, even though I'm a self taught artist, I was introduced into what they call pen and ink rendering. And I fell in love with it. So I was able to take a combination of utilizing pen and ink and watercolor washes and I had back in my 20s I had started publishing my own prints, and what I would do is I would pencil in, where I would go out and photograph whatever subject matter I was interested in at that time, it was just mostly items in the area, especially with architecture. And so I would go over photographs and go over with pen and ink and then use a light hand wash and make these paintings better yet, these limited edition prints originals by me hand painting them. It's a process that I use magnifiers, both traditional handheld magnifier, and then I have electronic, which is called a CCTV, which enables me to enlarge certain items on field a, I will say it's a combination of Electronic Magnifier on a monitor on a computer monitor.

Qudsiya Naqui:

I love that I love using these technology hacks to try to, you know, reimagine how painting is done, we think about it instead of a traditional way. But there's so many different ways to create visual art. And I love your process. And what are some of the messages you hope to convey in your work?

Michael Williams:

Well, the thing is that society seems to have a mindset to place limitation on us, as if we don't have already embedded in us. And my message is to allow individuals to be as free as possible, express itself in any way that you necessarily feel comfortable in doing. never allowed anyone to play some limitation on you, no one has the right to do. And at the same time, a society seems to think that when you have a form of disability, you don't have any ability to contribute to societies, or you have a certain way that you should be acting if you have a disability. And then they consider you as not being normal. And who is to say what normalcy is. normalcy is how you feel how you sip your power you love yourself from within, and expecting the world to accept you for who you are. First, you have to accept yourself for who you are. And be free to express yourself in any form or fashion you can, I have no shame in telling people that I'm visually impaired when I go out and show my artwork, the the, the what I get the kick out of is happening to the cat the expression on their face. And they want to look at every detail that I put into it. And I don't mind them doing it. Because to me, it's funny to allow them to have that awesome look on their faces. If this can't be possible that you're blind, or in this case, partially sighted, it's not possible for you to be honest. But if it is possible for any way for anyone to have who have a dream, to go out and pursue their dream and push it to the limit.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Do you have a favorite piece of work that you feel conveys those ideas? And if that's if that's the case, could you describe it for us,

Michael Williams

it's hard to put a favorite oh one is this like telling you know your parents choose the best child. And, and to me, it's impossible to do. But what I do is I love to do architecture. And some of the buildings that go out is either in my neighborhood, or if I find something online, that's a very interesting architecture piece, I'll do it. And then if I'm not satisfied with what I see that I'll come up with some type of scenery, just back it up. I get a lot of pleasure, thank you, thanks. But different scenarios, different scenes, and I tried to try to keep it as realistic as possible. But sometimes it's good to have a little fantasy. And and people when I do put up a painting that I've made up. Oh, that reminds me of a certain place. But it's not really an extra place is just a place that I made up. But it's you get a kick out of how these individuals are able to relate to something even though you just thought about it. And it's a fun thing to do. And it's the same thing about the music. But when I go into music, I'll do that if I feel that I can come up with a piece. I have different types of tempos , different sounds that I use in my library. And it's the same thing with my art. I'll just make something up if I like it. I'll just work with it. And if I don't like it, because I'll just destroy because there have been times that I've held off a music piece that I'll be about 80% finished and then I'll train my ear to listen. And if it doesn't sound right This just the whole project is thought all over again. And I just same thing with a painting, if I'm not satisfied with how the painting is before I sign my name on it.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Tell me a little bit more about your interest in music, which is a bit newer, you mentioned earlier, you sort of tried to take up being in a band earlier on in life, but kind of what moved away from that more towards the visual arts. But what what got you interested in in pursuing music more recently?

Michael Williams:

Um, it's listening to different artists. It's one of several my favorite artists is Orion Farish and Enya, I don’t know if I pronounced that right, and they do, basically electronicmusic. So I have been wanting to do this for a long time ever since I was in my 30s. And I was wondering how I could get my music out there, how could I produce it. And so during the pandemic, I was doing some more research back in 2020. And I ran across several magazines, one was called electronic music. And it was showing how you could take different samples and different electronics, like synthesizers, and make your own music, as well as have building up a sound library. So I tried it back in, I think, December 2020, I worked on our first songs, and it's called rebound. And I was very satisfied with this. So I produced it back in direct 24, or 2021, to be exact. So I distribute it through a distributor who put it out there through Spotify, iTunes, and people start liking it. And ever since then I put out a total of 18 soundtracks, since December of last year.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's wonderful. And I was reading an article that one of your paintings was acquired by President Obama. Can you tell us the story of how that happened? And what work he acquired and how?

Michael Williams:

yeah, it was my I had a couple of co workers they was saying, Michael, you need to submit one of your paintings to the president of the United States. And let's do it. So a couple years would go by, and something dawned on me like this may be a good time to submit an art piece to the president of the united states. So what happened was, I had one art competition through the American Printing House for the Blind. And it's an art competition that encouraged people who are blind or visually impaired to submit the artwork from all over the world. So I there is no thing. And it was just something that it was just a spur of the moment type of setting. And it was hot that day anyway. And so I just thought, Well, I do something to cool myself out, and I decided to work on the snow SNI low what I've known the following year, back in spring above, I want to say 2017. It might have been later than that. I got a letter from American Printing House for the Blind, saying congratulation to the art piece at one, and it will be featured in their calendar. So I was excited. Once I got the art piece back, I decided to submit it to President Obama. And I submitted not only that piece, it was called Winter Wonderland wa n d e r l a n d. And I submitted one of my mother's paintings. And I got a letter here later sent me from the president himself saying that he was just so he felt so wonderful for accepting these gifts. And he said that they will be part of this collection. And so to me, that was an honor. And it would be one of three letters that we received from him during the course of his term. And I almost felt like we were pen pals. I would write him so much. I sent him the also a calendar, I believe, with the painting feature in there as well.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's so cool. That's a wonderful, wonderful story. And is this art competition still in existence with the American Printing House for the Blind?

Michael Williams:

I believe it is Do you know with the pandemic out, it's been some changes and it's been a while it's been a matter of fact, it's been a couple of years since I submitted art piece due to the fact that the pandemic caused a lot of changes. But it is a yearly event and people can go to aph.org and see if they're putting a sum in, you know, sponsoring the art competition is a great way for people who are into art, or want to be artists, but feel like they don't know where to submit the art, because of the disability in this case, sight impairment. It's a great competition to to express yourself.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's great. And that leads me to my last question, which is, what advice would you have for disabled artists or aspiring disabled artists who want to who want to do this work.

Michael Williams:

And as I stated earlier, don't let anybody put limitations on you and say that you can't do it. Because if they knew everything, first of all, they will be pushing you in the right direction. Sometimes you have to be your own publicist to get to you get yourself out there. And nobody knows you better than yourself. I mean, you could get a publicist out there to tell everything about you. But you know more about you than anybody. And there could be some things that could spark people's interest that the publicist didn't know of, and, and gets you on, well on the way to, and whatever aspects of art that you want to be into, whether it's music, art, drawing, painting, dancing, singing, whatever it takes, you have to get out there. And I use this, this notion that if you want the world to notice you, you have to get out in the world to be noticed. You can't sit on the sidelines, this is not a sideline type event. And the world, the way the world know about you this, this, put yourself out there, because the be all honestly the world’s, too busy to pay attention to us. If we are just going to remain silent, and not be willing to stand up and speak out about who we are and what we're able to do. Because if you're sitting there, the world doesn't care about whether or not we exist. What it cares about is how well are we going to be out there representing ourselves and also contributing to society. And to be honest with you, we have unlimited resources, unlimited talent that the world need to know about. And if you are sitting there now thinking about what you should do, if that's on your mind is telling you that you should do it right now.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's really good advice. And I I often feel like I need to take that advice myself. So thank you for that. And where can people find your work Michael?

Michael Williams:

I have two sites. One is for my art which is called www.brightpointgalleries.com. that's all one word. My music is on Spotify. And it's under the artist name, Epic Sound Waves. I'm on Facebook. I'm on Instagram Bandcamp and SoundCloud, as well as Twitter.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thank you. And we'll provide links to all of those resources in our show notes. Well, it's been such a pleasure speaking with you, Michael, I really enjoyed learning about your art and your creative process. And I hope that our listeners will visit your website and experience your beautiful art. So thank you so much.

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thanks for listening to season five of Down to the Struts. This season. We heard from artists, scholars and youth activists, all dedicated to building a more accessible, inclusive and just world. I'd like to thank each and every one of our guests for their contributions in the movement for Disability Justice. This season would also not be possible without the energy and creativity of our audio producer Ilana Nevins and our social media manager, Avery Anapol. With special thanks to Claire Shanley for designing our logo, and Eiffel gangsta beats for our theme music. You can find us on Twitter and Instagram at Down to the Struts. And be sure to join our Facebook group. Down to the Struts Podcast for the latest updates and to join our growing community. You can also subscribe to the Down to the Struts newsletter on Substack for monthly podcast updates news from the disability community and actions you can take to move us further on the path to disability justice. Thanks again as always, to all those who listened in this season. If you liked what you heard, please share the podcast with a friend and spread the word and of course, stay tuned so we can get back down to it in season six. and on our way out with special thanks to Michael Williams. Here's more of the track rainforest that we heard earlier in the episode.

**[Soothing electronic beats]**