

Folk Tales Podcast

Episode 2: Music Apprenticeship

Audio Transcript

[00:00] **Intro (spoken by several consecutive voices over upbeat music):** Every summer, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival brings voices together, honoring the traditions we carry forward. This podcast is the un-hosted open mic for the Festival's tradition bearers, creatives, and storytellers. Culture isn't preserved in glass cases—it's lived, breathed, and passed forward. Here's the story.

[00:28] **(Recording of an original song by Stax Music Academy and Rebel Song Academy members, created at the Festival, with a chorus repeating "oh, oh" over piano)**

[00:40] **Malek Azrael:** We use art to create a community that feels like, "We dare you." We dare you to be vulnerable. We dare you to be creative. We dare you to come and enjoy yourself without conditions.

[00:54] **(Song continues, with a female voice singing a verse. Some lyrics are indiscernible.)**
I just wanna be somebody. You just wanna love me, but I just wanna go. You just wanna hold me, but I... Please, ... 'cause everybody has a plan. But you and I are much ... get a second chance.

[01:08] **Cristina Díaz-Carrera:** I'm Cristina Díaz-Carrera, and I'm a curator for the *Music Apprenticeship* and *Streetwise* areas of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. I worked really closely with Michelle Banks, who was the lead curator. I mean, she had hand-selected these groups and really, like, put a beautiful slate in front of me.

I connected with the groups and got to, from scratch, create the vibe of all the spaces. We have a Main Stage. We always have performances with artists, and musicians know what to do on a Main Stage, right? But the other spaces that we created, the recording studio—

[01:47] **(Sounds of noodling on a marimba outdoors)**

[01:51] **Azrael (in workshop):** Now can we do it with everybody?

[01:52] **Díaz-Carrera:** The drum workshop space—

[01:55] **(Two pitched drums)**

[02:01] **Díaz-Carrera:** The music classroom—

[02:04] **(Horns playing together)**

[02:07] **Azrael (in workshop):** So as you hear *ba da bup buh* [mimicking horns], right? It's only, uh, two vibratos, right? But we're enunciating with the staccato at the very beginning of the line.

[02:18] **Díaz-Carrera:** We were really taking our cues from the participants and the different groups, trying to figure out, "Oh, where do you practice? Where do you learn? What kind of workshops do you want to connect with the public on?"

[02:29] **Azrael (in workshop):** So anyway, it would take some of the life out of the line where we want it more straight.

[02:33] **Díaz-Carrera:** The name of the program is *Music Apprenticeship*, so that gives us, like, a lens with which to look at music. So, it's not any young person doing music. A lot of young people are doing music, and there are different models across the country. We're trying to look at these different programs that did it in different ways but are, like, connecting kids to the history that they come from.

[02:56] **(Band performs live, with one person speaking):** Malek Azreal on guitar and vocals.

[03:01] **Azreal (singing with band):** *Ay yeah, yeah...*

[03:03] **Azrael:** I got involved with artist mentorship from the beginning, actually.

[03:07] **Azrael (in workshop):** So art isn't perfect. Progress is perfection. Alright, so we're not here to write the most perfect song.

[03:13] **Azrael:** It was an idea that was starting at the time by founder Enrique Chi. He hosted songwriting workshops in one of our venues back home called Knuckleheads and essentially got all these young songwriters, me included, to play our songs for these industry professionals. We got feedback on our music. After doing that, I was like, "I just wanna keep writing music."

[03:36] **Azrael (singing soulfully over acoustic guitar):** *I think I like you, and I think you know it...*

[03:47] **Azreal:** I think it was like, that was like the first time I think I actually felt like what I was doing made sense.

[03:52] **(Azrael's song continues):** And then in goes, *Hold you, make me—*

[04:00] **Azreal:** That I can see myself doing for the rest of my life.

[04:02] **(Song continues):** *Always tell me the truth. 'Cause you've that school-tone, homegrown, ... family-in-a-happy-home kind of vibe that I like. And as it just so happens, my love is so sweet.* (Speaking) You wanna know what they call it? (Singing) *They call it molasses.*

[04:35] **Azrael:** When the organization kept running programming, like more workshops like that throughout time, I just kept showing up, and eventually it turned into a real nonprofit: Rebel Song Academy.

[04:45] **(Recording of "Whassup Whassup," created at the Festival, opening with turntable scratching sounds, followed by strummed acoustic guitar, keyboard, bass, and a simple beat)**

[04:53] **Azreal:** I was able to go through the real programming, and then I left for college to get an audio engineering degree, and then came back as a mentor and mentored for a couple of years, and then moved into a lead instructor where now I get to run the entire class.

[05:08] **Azrael (in workshop):** I'd like to introduce my buddy Alejandro, who's gonna help us choose some chords here. **(Audience member screams Alejandro's name and cheers.)**

[05:13] **Alejandro Arias (in workshop):** Hello, everyone. My name is Alejandro Arias.

[05:16] **Arias:** I got involved in music by playing the guitar about four or five years ago. **(Sound of soft electric guitar melody fades in.)** I joined Rebel Song Academy like a year and a half ago, and that's where it all exploded. From this past year and a half, I've been to so many places, including the Smithsonian, to not only perform but also teach people about songwriting.

[05:35] **Azrael:** Working with students like Alejandro, it is almost a full-circle moment because I was in that place, and so seeing that same process happen for another student will always be the most meaningful part.

[05:45] **(Band playing with lyrics in Spanish)**

[05:56] **Azrael:** Being a mentor, sometimes it's very, it's very interesting because a lot of times I'm just existing, and then kids are just watching me. And then seeing Alejandro perform, it was like already a great songwriter, and, um, a lot of times when these students are coming, they're already pretty talented in some way, shape, or form. So getting a chance to kind of like nurture that.

[06:16] **Arias:** I met Malek when I joined the classes. He was there that first day. **[Sounds of various instruments warming up.]** At first, I was blown away by his vocal talent. I was like, "This guy's insane." Like, he has a great voice. I gravitated towards him at first 'cause I was like, "This guy knows what he was doing." He was awesome. I would throw ideas back to him. He would bounce back ideas, and he helped me write my first song, which is pretty awesome.

[06:42] **(Recording of band with lyrics in Spanish)**

[06:49] **Azrael:** A lot of the nurturing sometimes is not getting in there, moving things around. Sometimes, it is just giving a safe place to bounce ideas out or say things out loud, and it's listening and then allowing them to use their best judgment and trust themselves. Because we don't teach creativity; we teach people how to trust their own creativity.

It'll be the dialogue of "What are you hoping to do? What is your intention?" Sometimes, having that conversation, he is able to carry it across the finish line himself.

[07:15] **Arias:** My relationship with Malek, he saw me as more than just a student but more of an artist in the Kansas City area. **(Song continues.)**

[07:30] **Azrael:** Our thing is we want to go against the normal. We are in a world where it tells you to keep your stuff to yourself and don't share. We're like, no, let us know what's going on, and let's help each other create together.

[7:42] **(Dialogue in songwriting workshop between audience members and facilitators)**

—D.C. drivers are getting bolder.

—"D.C. drivers are getting bolder"? Ooh!

—"D.C. drivers are getting bolder." That's nice.

[07:54] **Azrael:** I think songwriting is such a powerful thing. You're writing music, you're writing a song, but sometimes you're telling a story. You're telling your story. You're telling someone else's story. And I think that just helps us all connect with each other.

[8:04] **(Dialogue in workshop)**

—Are you guys ready?!

(Cheers.)

—Topic! Somebody give me a topic! Any topic!

(Multiple voices shouting)

—Freedom! Togetherness! I like it!

[08:13] **Arias:** For me, personally, when I write alone, it's vulnerable things. Whether it's, like, heartbreak or, like, things that you're going through, you're able to get more intimate. But when you're with a group, and, like, with me, I have a lot of friends that play, like, different instruments. We're just jamming on a couple chords, and we're doing what gets thrown out. I have a drummer going **(snare drum plays a beat)**, I'm playing bass **(electric bass joins)**, and we have another guitar player **(guitar joins)**, and then eventually we have a full five-minute song.

[08:44] **Azrael:** Fun fact: writing a song alone is terrifying. Writing a song with other people is less terrifying. The reason why is because you write a song with other people, a lot of times, students helping someone tell their story.

[08:57] **Díaz-Carrera:** Rebel Song Academy already had this method for working with kids of all musical abilities, where they're just trying to demystify the songwriting process and make it accessible and show people that everyone can do it. And so that was the goal that they came in with.

[09:16] **Arias:** So, what we brought to the Smithsonian is we brought the Open Sounds Lab, and we also brought Popcorn Songwriting.

[09:22] **Azrael (in workshop):** So, this is an activity that we're gonna do called Popcorn Songwriting. Um, we'd use this within our curriculum when we go into schools or within our in-house programming. We use this activity to kind of get just some, uh, quick, fast creative juices flowing. And, uh...

[09:38] **Arias:** Popcorn Songwriting was a place where we had a couple instrumentalists. We had Malek singing, and we would draw points from the crowd. So, we would teach them how to create a chord progression using the national number system. They would pick the numbers, so they would create the chord progression.

[09:54] **Azrael and Arias (in workshop, speaking rapidly like an auctioneer):** Can I, can I get a number? Can I get a number? Anybody? You can throw me a number. That's how it's gonna be.

Arias: We need one number.

Azreal: We need a number. A number. Six! Alright, let's do it.

—That's our first chord.

—What is that?

—A minor. **(Plays A minor on guitar.)**

—Alright. Another number?

[10:08] **Arias:** They'd pick a style, they'd pick the story to go with the song, and then we'd have volunteers from the crowd write the lyrics and end up singing it with us.

[10:17] **Azrael (in workshop):** Okay. We have singers out there, right? We got some singers, right? You wanna come up here? You can come here. Yeah. Come on up. I said come on up. **(Audience cheers.)**

[10:28] **(A woman sings a slow, country-tinged song):** *I had to go free, oh... I had to go free, free...*

[10:24] **Azrael:** Every single time that I've worked with a songwriter, they always have the same reaction, which is, "I wanna write this song that is popping," whatever genre. And I'm like, "Okay, great. So how's life? How are you doing?" And they're like, "Well, are we gonna start the songwriting process?" I was like, "We just did."

[11:01] **Azrael (in workshop):** Is that a thumbs up right now? You like that? Okay, but y'all gotta help me on that chorus 'cause it's quick. All right. You gotta be like, "It can only get better." Are you ready? One, two, ready—*It can.* . .

[11:12] **Azreal:** Songwriting starts off with a dialogue, and in order to write a song that you connect with, you have to really be present, wholly. So, for me, when I write, my first thing that I'm thinking about is "Let's have a conversation with ourselves and be vulnerable." What are you excited about? What are you a little nervous about? What are you avoiding? That can feel very invasive, but if you keep going, and you keep persevering through it and just allow yourself to be unconditionally vulnerable, I think you have every chance to be a great songwriter.

[11:41] **(Dialogue in workshop)**

—I've got *places* to go.

—"I've got places to go." Not getting older, I've got places to go.

(A child yells): Just speed up 'cause you're slower!

—He's slow?

[11:49] **Díaz-Carrera:** The attitude that they had in terms of the openness and the wonderful way that they were able to make people feel comfortable when singing in a microphone or

playing in front of a microphone—that's, like, a vulnerable experience, you know? They were well-positioned and had the right kind of attitude.

[12:10] **(Dialogue in workshop)**

— (Guitar plays.) Maybe just freestyle a melody line. You wanna just try it out? (An audience members starts singing a melody over the guitar.)

—“It can only get better”? Is that our chorus?

—*It can only get better.*

—“It can only get better.” Write that down.

[10:24] **Azrael:** It's just us, like, teaching people how not to take songwriting like this big mountain.

[12:29] **Azrael (in workshop):** A lot of times, people think as a songwriter you gotta be, you gotta think in poetic ways, but sometimes it's actually as simple as, “What is my story? What am I trying to say?” So we have a lot of cool prompts on the board. Can someone think of just the beginning of our story?

[12:43] **Azrael:** It's kind of a lightness when you're not caring any shame about who you are, when you have a place where you can be vulnerable and a safe place where you can try new things and where you can and try to be more of yourself.

[12:52] **Díaz-Carrera:** There was a girl, they told me, that came in. She had never played drums before, and she had something in her mind, and they're like, “Play this part, and we'll stitch it together.”

[13:02] **Azrael (in workshop):** Fist bump. You're taller than me right now. Yeah. So, what'd you wanna say?

[13:07] **Díaz-Carrera:** So, she played, like, three different parts, you know, in three different times. **(Sparse drums over a metronome.)** They stitched this drumbeat together. It was like, “Here, look, you made this. Like, you, you played this!”

[13:25] **(Recording of “It Can Only Get Better” with male singer over full band)** *Beat up trucks with no AC. Pavement so hot it's smoky. Road rage, babe, is low-key.* (Chorus sings) *It can only get better.*

[13:43] **Arias:** I feel like we got a pretty good reaction from the crowd. We had a good turnout every time. And we made some nice songs, which is pretty fun.

[13:49] **Azreal:** It's been fun seeing people laugh and have fun and be silly and then, but also come out with a really cool song.

[13:53] **(Playing song in workshop, with two vocalists, guitar, and bass):** *But it can only get better. It can only, it can only get better. You can wear a sweater. You can wear a sweater! In this hot D.C. weeeaaather.* (Laughing.)

[14:20] **Azrael (in workshop):** Yes. Woo. We just wrote a song in thirty-five minutes. Yeah, it was beautiful.

[14:27] **Azrael:** That's another thing. When we get done writing the song, we go and record it like right across in our actual lab. We go and record the song, so then people get to hear the songwriting process *and* the recording process.

[14:34] **Arias:** We would then take those Popcorn Songwriting songs, and then you would produce them on the spot.

The Open Sound Lab was an open recording studio with our DAW setup, all the amps, the instruments. We had a kit mic'd up, so it was just like a normal recording studio, just out on the National Mall lawn, which is awesome.

So, we would produce those songs. We would be there from early morning until the Festival would shut down.

[14:58] **Díaz-Carrera:** You can't be precious about what a recording studio is. It's like, "Oh, we can't have sound. We can't have this bucket drummer in the back." None of that mattered because it was about the spirit of the place and how people are coming in. They ended up doing stuff where they would layer sound, so there would be, like, something that had been put down, and then a group would come in and be like, "Do you wanna sing over this?" A lot of different voices and genres coming together in a very open way.

[15:25] **Arias:** We would have members of the Stax Academy come by, and they would play some stuff, and then we would track them. **(Clip of R&B song with female vocalist repeating "Everybody wants somebody, and I just want to be somebody.")**

We had a couple other people—they created some, like, rap songs, some hip-hop. **(Clip of hip-hop song with male vocalist rapping, "What's up, what's up, what's up, am I checking me? Baby, am I feeling me? What's up, what's up, what's up, am I feeling me?")**

We had some cool, like, acoustic stuff that we did also. **(Live performance of acoustic guitar and trumpet.)**

It was just cool seeing everyone get involved in pushing in, like, a little guitar part, a little bass part, just all scattered around to make a couple cool songs at a festival.

[16:28] **Díaz-Carrera:** I mean, this is stuff that happens every Festival program, improvisationally, behind the scenes, and unplanned. People could layer and vibe off of each other.

[16:38] **Arias:** At first, we were supposed to perform our own songs on the Main Stage, but we ended up scrapping that and just doing the Popcorn Songwriting on the Main Stage, which turned out to be great. The crowd, they really participated really well, and that was, like, our idea.

[16:52] **(Performance of “It Can Only Get Better” with a full band on Main Stage):**

D.C. drivers,

Getting bolder, not getting older,

I got places to go.

Temperatures are rising, no one is smiling.

Temper is hot. Hit the gas with all you’ve got!

Temperatures are rising, no one is smiling...

[17:09] **Cristina Díaz-Carrera:** What the Rebel Song Academy was able to bring was a beautiful synergistic space where so many lessons that we could have about how musicians can come in the future and create space for collaboration.

[17:22] **(Song continues, with some laughing on stage)**

You can’t wear a sweater

In this hot, hot, hot weather

[17:39] **Azrael:** I love this festival. It’s been amazing. We came in with these crazy ideas of what we wanted to do here, and the people here have just encouraged us to do it. We were able to bring our whole team. We got a chance to sit down and just look around and see how many different cultures there are, how many different organizations there are, just for arts, just for creation, just for creating some kind of community where people can go when they have nowhere else to go. **(Recording of “Marianas Faluwei,” starting with strumming on a ‘ukulele.)**

[18:16] **Arias:** I’m glad that we’re also focusing our attention on the youth and they’re like our next-generation big thing. The youth is gonna be the ones taking in these big effects.

[18:26] **Azreal:** What we do best is create this environment that feels like a whole separate thing, so when you show up, you get to be more of you than you may get to be anywhere else because you are encouraged to try something new. You're encouraged to be more of the *you* that you wish you could be out in the world. So, if you have a place where you can, like, do that safely, it will make it easier to make that transition into the world to be in totality yourself. **(Song continues with chorus singing in Chamorro language with steel drums.)**

[19:04] **Shauri Thacker:** *Folk Tales: Youth and the Future of Culture* is a production of the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. Abby Scamardella produced this episode.

Music is as much a part of our culture as the languages we speak. Stick around for our next episode to hear how four Indigenous North American tribes are reclaiming their mother tongues.