

## **IMANI STEVENS**

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### **FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW**

**DATE:** October 9, 2021

**LOCATION:** Online via Zoom.com

**INTERVIEWER:** Amy C. Evans

**TRANSCRIPTION:** Amy C. Evans

**LENGTH:** 18 minutes

**PROJECT:** Houston in 2020: Self-Employed Black Artists

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**Amy C. Evans** [00:00:03]: Alright. So. This is Saturday, October 9, 2021, and this is Amy Evans on Zoom for my follow-up interview with Imani Stevens. Imani, could I get you to introduce yourself for this follow-up interview, please?

**Imani Stevens** [00:00:21]: Hi, I am Imani Stevens—also go by E-Money. My art is deejaying, and I am originally from Houston, currently based in New York City. *[Short laugh]*

**ACE:** Yes! So we lost our Houston deejay to the wilds of New York. And so it's exciting to do this follow-up, specifically with you, for that reason, since you have completely changed your living situation. So you can fold that development into my first question for you, which is: How has Covid and/or the Black Lives Matter movement, which was so important and present and significant a year ago—and, I mean, continues, but it was really significant when I started this project in August 2020 when I last interviewed you. So, how have those two things impacted or influenced the work you're doing today?

**IS:** [01:16] So I don't necessarily think that the Black Lives Matter movement has affected me, just because, you know, being a Black person, I've kind—that's always been kind of in the background of my life, so the only difference really being that think kind of brought everything to the forefront. I think it's made more of a global impact, which I definitely appreciate, rather than a personal one. But Covid, for sure, definitely impacted my art. Since I was not doing deejaying so much, it kind of had me reassess what I want to do career-wise. And so , it's just been a lot less deejaying for me and doing it more for joy, rather than sustainability.

**ACE:** [02:07] So what flipped that switch for you? Is there something specific?

**IS:** [02:11] Well, I just had a lot of leisure time in Covid, and I think I was just hitting that age where *[short laugh]* you know, you just start thinking about your future. I was—I turned twenty-five during Covid, and now I'm twenty-six, so I was just, like, you know, something as big as this can just kind of really have such a huge impact on my career, and I don't really know what the future is going to be like, you know? So. At the same time, I was kind of—when I was deejaying back to back, it was getting a little, like, more so deejaying for work, rather than, like, you know, for joy, for doing the things that I love. So I found myself listening to less music at that time, and now I notice that I'm listening to a lot more music like I was when I first started deejaying so—it's kind of just like reassessing my relationship with the art that I choose to do. And so—I am not sure if I answered your question but—*[laughs]*

**ACE:** [03:22] You did. You're working now in the music industry, right?

**IS:** [03:24] I am, yes. So I did take time to kind of think about the things that I love. And music is, of course, something that I love so, so dearly. So during Covid, while I was not deejaying, I started looking into opportunities to start working with music. I started with an internship in publishing, and I didn't—it was too hectic for me. *[Laughs]* So I'm now working in music licensing, which is, you know, getting music into films, teevee shows, advertisements, which I find really awesome because, in a way, it's kind of sim—sorry, I have a cat right here. In a way, it's similar to deejaying in that you're, like, breaking these artists to big audiences through commercials or teevee shows or whatever, so. I'm really enjoying it.

**ACE:** [04:21] That's so great. And a question that just occurred to me is, I wonder, if you think bac—back about last year—

**IS:** Um-hmm.

**ACE:** And I'm just really amazed when we look back how we all survived—*[laughs]*

**IS:** I know.

**ACE:** [04:33] Or, many of us survived. Many didn't, of course. But—what a year. But I wonder if you, as a deejay, have, like, a soundtrack for the year of Covid. Like is there a piece of music that is really significant that marks that time for you?

**IS:** [04:48] Hmm, that is a very good question. I found myself going back to, like, childhood or like teen *[laughs]* music for me. Or a lot of gospel because that really grounds me. So I dove really heavily, for example, into The Clark Sisters, which were just like a staple, growing up in a Christian household, for me, and my mom playing it as a child on Sunday mornings. So that was really awesome, to go back. I—yeah, probably gospel, for me, was really what I would refer to for my year of 2020.

**ACE:** [05:27] That's perfect. Yeah. I think comfort and nostalgia are two things that a lot of us relied on *[laughs]* during the past—

**IS:** Definitely.

**ACE:** —eighteen months. Okay, and I also wanted to ask you—and this, you've kind of spoken to this a little bit, but what are some of the changes to your art practice or your creative musical interests that you experienced as a result of Covid that you might maintain today, if there's anything?

**IS:** [05:50] The result of—I mean, Covid really showed me that it's—it's okay to take time away. And it's okay to kind of, like—I don't know, reassessing my relationship with deejaying was a really nice feeling because you get like—I got reinspired. I am really excited to do this project that we have coming up where I'm going to be creating a mix [as my commissioned piece for the Houston in 2020 project]. I feel like I have not—I've been deejaying but not, like, publicly, really, you know, moving to a different city, so this will be very exciting. Yeah. Yeah, it's just really allowed me to kind of take a step back. I've gotten a lot of asks since moving here, actually, when people find out that I deejay, to teach them. So that's a new thing that I'm getting into, and I've had two people that I've taught already. So it's really nice just to share this practice and this art that I love that I'm now doing, like, leisurely.

**ACE:** [07:06] Yeah, an opportunity to mentor people who want to get into it. I—I just want to say, for the sake of the recording, that the mix you're talking about is the commissioned piece for the Houston in 2020 project that's part of what—I'm having everybody create an original piece, kind of in response to or in support of our collaboration. So I'm really excited about that, too—to see what that's going to be.

**IS:** Me too. Can't wait to see what everyone else does.

**ACE:** Yeah. I know. I am so glad we're all in a more positive space now to think that way and do something that's more—you know, because the project has been to really mark this moment and kind of document it in real time, but then now to create a response to it that is creative, I think, will be, hopefully, cathartic for everybody. I mean, I see, kind of, that's the value of it for each of y'all and the end of this, which, it just—what a year. Anyway, okay. So my next question is: In

relation to *The New York Times*' review [by Osayi Endolyn] of *High on the Hog: How African American Cuisine Transformed America*, the Netflix series, that—I don't know if you've seen it. Have you seen it?

**IS:** [08:15] I have seen it, yeah.

**ACE:** Yeah?

**IS:** It was beautiful. *[Laughs]*

**ACE:** [08:17] Yeah, it's so beautiful. And then Houston at the end. And the Ocean of Soul TSU [Texas Southern University] marching band. Like—it just—and it ended on the best note for me.

**IS:** Um-hmm.

**ACE:** [08:24] And so that's—I really took from that series and Osayi Endolyn's review in *The New York Times* about how, even though that was talking about the African influence on—and African American influence on Southern food culture, it relates to everything we've talked about in Houston in 2020, and I love some of the quotes that Osayi Endolyn included in *The New York Times* piece. One is from Stephen Satterfield, the host of the series, who said, "Oftentimes when our shows get made, when our stories get told, it's the 'hardship' story. I don't even mean celebrating resilience. I mean look at all these beautiful Black people in a centuries-long tradition of how we shape culture, celebrate, and make a living." And so, I wanted to ask you, Imani, about the idea that Black artists are not just celebrating resistance but shaping culture and what you think about that.

**IS:** [09:22] Yeah. That's—I did not realize that [quote] is from—related to that [series] at all. So that's really awesome. I—this one is a little harder for me to think about, but I just think, like, in the grand scheme of things, it's—like, since all of these things have happened, like the Black Lives Matter movement, centering Black people, and then, like, Covid disproportionately affecting people of color and Black people, it—I think people are really looking to Black people to see how we're feeling about certain things or, like, looking to us and, if we as Black artist are creating in this time, then most people looking to us are taking influence in some sort of way. I know they recently—I—I—this is probably just completely unrelated, I know a lot of people weren't super-thrilled about this, but also, kind of—it just—you'll know—yeah. Anyways, when Juneteenth got acknowledged as like a national holiday [ED NOTE: *Juneteenth, the June 19th holiday commemorating the end of slavery by marking the day enslaved people in Texas learned they were free, was declared a federal holiday in the summer of 2021*], it was kind of—it was nice, but—because it's something that we've been celebrating in Houston for so long, but also I was kind of like, is this just, like, a hand-me-out-type thing? But, yeah, it's really cool to see the ways that this time is affecting the culture that we're in. So.

**ACE:** [10:53] Yes. Absolutely. I feel like—and I said this, I think, in my description on the project—of the project on the website that creative people always have creative solutions, and I think all of that has really been at the forefront of the past year we've had. And then to celebrate Black contributions and contributions of people of color, it's—it's opened up so many—

**IS:** [11:18] That's—yeah, now that you mention that, I'm thinking about all the community fridges that popped up throughout Covid. I believe the first one actually started in New York, so

I've seen a few here. I saw some happening in Houston when I was there. And I think that's a really beautiful thing. I'm seeing more projects popping up, spawning from that idea. There's an exhibit at the Project Row Houses [in Houston] with the *[short laugh]*—with the kitchen thing—the—sorry, the refrigerator. Yeah, and I'm seeing projects happen here like the Auxilio Space in New York where they're, like, catering to brown people and people of color who are not, you know, getting food. I've seen HAGS [restaurant] here [in New York], as well, and they cater to trans[gender] people and people of color and just low-income people in general, and they just randomly have, like, “Well, we're giving out free food.” And these are, like, Michelin-trained restaurants—like *[short laugh]* the leaders of these projects are prized people, so one trained with a Michelin-star chef, one won a season of, like, not [the Food Network show] *Top Chef* but like the one-episode thing. Anyway, it's really cool to see, like you're saying, all of these artists spawning these movements.

**ACE:** [12:43] Um-hmm. And some social-cultural barriers being broken, I think, because of that. And I think—I think, too, that a lot of this can and will be sustained. It's not just like something that's, you know, happening because it needs to happen but that it's something that people now realize is something that is needed and can and should be maintained.

**IS:** [13:07] Definitely.

**ACE:** [13:08] So then, on the heels of that, another part of *The New York Times* piece on *High on the Hog* is about joy. So, Doctor Jessica B. Harris, who's featured prominently in the first episode and the whole series was based on her—her work. But she has a quote in *The New York Times* piece that says, “Our joy is enduring. It's the thing that most defines us.” And then, Osayi

Endolyn, who wrote *The New York Times* piece, says about *High on the Hog* that, ultimately, it's a show about unbridled joy. So, I would like to know, Imani, how you have claimed joy this year.

**IS:** [13:43] Oh, man. I've claimed joy just—when you look at the past year, it's truly insane. I guess the past two years at this point. But just all the loss that we've had to go through as nation, I mean, as the whole world, it really had me kind of reevaluat—reevaluate my life. Like, you know, I'm only—you never know how long you're here, so I'm finding joy in everything. I'm saying “yes” to the things I want to do, “no” to the things that don't bring me joy. I am feeling okay if I stay home for a day and just watch all of my favorite shows. *[Laughs]*

**ACE:** *[Laughs]*

**IS:** [14:32] Another thing I enjoy doing is cooking, so I'm going to the farmers' market a lot. I am going to record shops, listening for new music, all of these things *[short laugh]* that make me personally happy.

**ACE:** [14:48] Yeah. And I spoke with Anamaris [Cousins Price] yesterday—our chef from the project—and we agreed—and I think this is a thread that's going to be running through all these interviews is everyone is being more intentional in every area of their life. That you—you recognize that you have that power now—

**IS:** Yeah.

**ACE:** —to say no and choose what's right and take some time and it's—I mean, I think it's going to be a profound cultural shift, going forward, really. So we will see. And then that is a segue to my last question, which I kind of have changed a little bit, but I—I wonder, you know, I

kind of want to get your reflections on participating in this project, Houston in 2020, but, more than that, I kind of wonder what you see this project will mean ten, twenty years from now and how we'll look back on this time.

**IS:** [16:40] Oh, yeah. Okay. So I am, firstly, very honored to be a part of this project. I am not relying on deejaying now for my income, but it was a substantial part of my life. I deejayed for six years. I mean, I still am deejaying, but I would say I was doing it for that long, just on its own. And it's just a really nice—it's really nice to a.) be acknowledged but also to have this marker in time. So I think, you know, in, like, ten years, twenty years, looking back at this, I can see, you know, how I was, how the music industry or deejaying scene was. I can look back and see the other arts and how they were affected and how—it'll be just nice to know—to see how things have changed, you know. Because we expect things to be different after Covid, since Covid just made such a huge impact in the way we're living and to see what things will continue from that in the future and what things we leave behind will be interesting, and this project will, you know, it'll—it's right there [in the project title]: 2020. It's kind of cool. *[Laughs]*

**ACE:** [17:00] It is cool. And it—you know, now I am inspired to try and revisit everyone [from the project] in ten years and see how things have changed and—because I plan on staying in touch with all of y'all. And then, we were talking before we recorded that Anamaris and I are scheming a meal for her to create for this group and for us all to be together in the same room, finally, in person.

**IS:** Yeah.

**ACE:** So I look forward to that happening when you're back in town. So, thank you so much, Imani. Do you have any other thoughts or comments or anything this morning?

**IS:** [17:36] No, this has been great, and I love that we've done a follow-up and plan to do more. It's just—yeah, I'm really excited to be a part of this.

**ACE:** Well, thank you so much. It's been so great to get to know you and be introduced to your work, and I wish you all good things, and I will look forward to, hopefully, seeing you in December when you're in town.

**IS:** [17:58] Yeah, definitely. Thank you.

**ACE:** Thank you, Imani. Alright.

**[18:04]**

**[END]**