

**IMANI STEVENS**

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DATE: August 13, 2020  
LOCATION: Online via Zoom.com  
INTERVIEWER: Amy C. Evans  
TRANSCRIPTION: Rev.com  
LENGTH: 53 minutes, 41 seconds  
PROJECT: Houston in 2020: Self-Employed Black Artists

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**Amy Evans** [00:03]: Okay. Good morning. This is Amy Evans on Thursday, August 13th, 2020. I am on Zoom speaking with Imani Stevens. Imani, would you please say your name and describe what you do for us?

**Imani Stevens** [00:21]: Hello. My name is Imani Stevens. I am a deejay here in Houston.

**AE** [00:28]: Could I ask you to please share your birthdate for the record, Imani?

**IS** [00:32]: July 3rd, 1995.

**AE** [00:36]: Thank you. Happy Belated Birthday.

**IS** [00:38]: Thank you.

**AE** [00:40]: Yeah. Thank you for making time for me this morning. I look really forward to learning more about you. First I want to ask if you're from Houston, originally.

**IS** [00:52]: Yes, I am. I've lived here all of my life with the exception of my freshman year of college when I went to St. John's in New York.

**AE** [01:02]: Oh, wow. How was that experience?

**IS** [01:05]: It was nice. I have family there. My dad [Edwin Stevens] is from New York, and he has a lot of family that still lives there, so it was nice to be able to get closer with all of them.

**AE** [01:16]: Cool. Yeah. The Houston question for natives is where'd you go to high school?

**IS** [01:21]: I went to Carnegie Vanguard [a top rated, public, magnet school in Houston's Fourth Ward neighborhood.]

**AE** [01:23]: Oh, nice. Tell me about that.

**IS** [01:25]: It was an interesting experience. A small school, so I don't have the typical high school experience, but I'm very thankful for it. I got a lot of close friends just from seeing such a small group of people every day. Got to meet people that I probably otherwise wouldn't have met, so it was nice.

**AE** [01:50]: Then I see that you graduated from U of H [University of Houston] fairly recently. Was that in December?

**IS** [01:56]: I graduated in 2018 in December. Yeah, with a major in media studies and a minor in creative work.

**AE** [02:09]: Creative work is a minor?

**IS** [02:11]: Yeah.

**AE** [02:13]: What does that mean, creative work?

**IS** [02:15]: It's essentially finding ways to be creative in whatever it is you choose to do in your life. It was an honors class, and I found it very interesting because I just didn't know what I wanted to minor in, and I thought that would be a nice thing to do.

**AE** [02:31]: What kind of things did you study with that as your minor?

**IS** [02:39]: So, that minor is geared toward all majors. So I was taking classes with engineers and people that were studying physics and all sorts of things. So it was really just like—I had some art history classes. I studied ancient history in Egypt. Just really kind of broadening our context of what art is and isn't and how we can be creative in certain spaces.

**AE** [03:12]: Wow. So what were some of your takeaways from that being your minor?

**IS** [03:19]: I would say [**short pause**] I've been working in creative spaces pretty much since I've been in college, so it was more an expansion in what I was already learning while working at Project Row Houses and—yeah, just ust a lot of collaborative work, a lot of getting to understand other people and what they do and what they bring to the table. Yeah.

**AE** [03:52]: Yeah. It sounds like a lot of interdisciplinary opportunities and networking with people in different fields.

**IS** [03:58]: Yeah.

**AE** [04:00]: That's what I love about the humanities in general is that there's so much overlap. That's so cool. I didn't even know that that was an opportunity for a minor. My, how things have changed. Then tell me about your major. What were your plans with your major, and how did you apply that when you graduated?

**IS** [04:18]: I initially went into college wanting to study film and TV. So that's what I did when I went to New York, but that's when I actually joined the radio station, and I found that I loved

music far more than I did film and TV and making it. I chose media studies primarily just because U of H didn't have a radio focus, and I thought that would be the most inclusive.

**AE** [04:49]: Very cool. And so tell me too, I saw that you went to Egypt with the honors college.

**IS** [04:56]: Yeah.

**AE** [04:56]: Okay. Tell me about that experience.

**IS** [05:00]: So that was crazy. I never expected in my life to go to Egypt. It's a place that you always see growing up, but I don't know. It was really cool because I have been out of the country but never to Africa or to a place as historically important or—as Egypt. I got to see a lot of historical things, like the pyramids. And throughout that class we were learning Egyptology, so I had a historical context to what I was seeing and that made it a lot more interesting.

**AE** [05:38]: Wow. Tell me how that may have influenced you as an artist.

**IS** [05:48]: On the trip to Egypt, I went with my class and a few people that were not in my class. I am not the type of person who's a talkative person in class, so I was still strangers with all of these people by the time that the trip happened. I don't know. Just really that whole minor. Just trying to get closer with people from different backgrounds and different studies I think has influenced me to just take all these other things that I wouldn't normally take into consideration. You get to hear perspectives from other people, hear what type of music is impactful to them, take a listen and put that into my own creative practice.

**AE** [06:41]: What kind of music did you hear over there?

**IS [06:46]:** I don't know the specific type. The thing that we had to do in Egypt, our whole end of the year project was to create something creative just based on what you learned. I actually made a song. So my entire thing was just to primarily—I wanted to take soundbites from Egypt. I didn't hear a lot of music while I was there, but you hear lots of the conversations with people. You hear different languages. You see a majority of Brown people that I don't see in the states or in any European country that I visited. It was just a different sort of thing. You engage with their food, which is very—I love food as much as I love music, so that was really nice. **[07:39]** Yeah. I can't say that I listened to music there. I listened to a lot of my own music that I had on Spotify, what I—I found myself listening to a lot of relaxing music, a lot of instrumental things while there because it just fit the mood for me. It was a nice heat. Not too hot. I was dressed modestly and it was very—Yeah. I don't know if that answered the question.

**AE [08:11]:** It did. It did. I like what you said about all the sounds. So you did a lot of sampling while you were there? You recorded some street sounds and things?

**IS [08:17]:** Yeah, I did. That was my intention when I created the song, but I didn't actually use a lot of sampling because I just started to get into production around that time. It was really difficult for me. I had some help from a friend, but yeah. It helped, definitely, to create the vibe of the song that ended up coming out of that.

**AE [08:42]:** The final piece, is that something—I wonder how it was received at the end of your class or session with that group?

**IS** [08:53]: I did a collaborative project with someone who I have become very close with over the course of the trip[, Samina Huq]. She was an engineer major and she really liked music, but she never went into it or thought of it at all as anything other than just listening to it. She actually started rapping on the trip. I listen to a lot of rap music. I'm not a rapper, but I am familiar with cadence and all of those things, so it comes pretty naturally for me. We created this rap song about what we learned while in Egypt and before going to Egypt and how it added up. It was received very well. People were like, "Oh, wow. Are you a rapper? Do you have any more music? You made this?" It was nice. Then my dad, that was the first song that he heard from me and he was like, "Oh, that's pretty cool."

**AE** [09:52]: Wow. Does the song have a title?

**IS** [09:57]: It's just called Egypt. It is available on Spotify—I mean sorry, SoundCloud.

**AE** [10:01]: Okay, I'm going to look for it. That's so cool. When you're talking about all the sounds and different experiences in Egypt. It reminds me of—I don't know if you're familiar with the Kitchen Sisters? They have a show on NPR [National Public Radio] where they interview people. I had a workshop with them years ago and they—since they do radio, they always like to get a sense of a place wherever they visit and listen to AM radio. It records little soundbites to layer into their final radio piece. So if they're in Cajun country, they want to get a little sampling of the radio of people speaking in Cajun French or the music of the place to really give listeners that sense of place. I was really relating to that part of what you said.

**IS** [10:47]: Oh, nice.

**AE** [10:49]: I don't really know a lot about deejaying, but in looking at your Instagram and learning about what you do and the way you process music and share music—in particular, I'm thinking about your playlist when you say that they're expressions of your mood and you have that Pantone color swatch on your Instagram. Tell me about that. Where did that come from?

**IS** [11:13]: I'm not a person that really likes to put mixes out because I'm very nitpicky, and I always find error in recorded things. So it's very hard for me to actually put mixes out, and I really pushed myself for that one. I was like, "Just what's something that you would really want to hear just to have fun at home?" So you don't have to always go out. You could just have a fun little mix happening. So I went with that. My partner [Sinclair Davis] and I, we used to—Every time we saw each other, she has these Pantone swatches and it would be like, "Oh, what's your mood today?" We would pick a color and explain how we were feeling about that day. So it was based on that.

**AE** [12:01]: Love that. I don't know if this is a thing or if I'm just making assumptions, but in the photographs of you at your residency Axelrad [Beer Garden in Houston], light is such an important part of the theme that is documented that you share on your Instagram. Is that something you do a lot when you deejay live?

**IS** [12:21]: That is all thanks to Wonky Power [talent agency in Houston], who does the sound and lighting at Axelrad. We have become very close. I've become very close with some of the employees for Wonky Power. They always ask me how the light is, so I do a few adjustments, but it's mostly them. My partner is actually very into lighting and setting. So I probably picked

up some things from her with that as well, about how I would like my face to look and things with light. Yeah.

**AE** [12:58]: Really cool. I jumped ahead a little bit of where the conversation was just to get those things out, but I want to ask you—I want to go back and ask about the Supastar Spin Academy. When did you do that and what exactly did you do while you were there?

**IS** [13:16]: I did that in the summer of 2015 after my freshman year of college. So after I had done the whole radio thing, I had seen some peers of mine that were scratching on air and deejaying live while I was just playing playlists, and I thought that was so cool and something that I wanted to do. So that Christmas, the Christmas of 2014, I asked my dad for a controller so I could start deejaying, and he got me this baby controller. And so I started practicing, but I just had no idea what I was doing. And so my mom [Deidra Flores] actually found DJ Supastar because they grew up together. She's like, "Oh, she has a spin academy." So I went. It was a two-week course. I was taught by both Supastar and DJ Good Grief. It was just the basics of deejaying, so I just got the foundation of how to blend and mix and things.

**AE** [14:17]: So that's a thing that is owned by a female deejay that exists in the world that is Houston?

**IS** [14:23]: Yes. It's so cool.

**AE** [14:27]: How long has it been around?

**IS** [14:29]: I am not sure. I went in 2015. I think it was open maybe two or three years before me going there, but I'm not completely sure. [Supastar Spin Academy opened in 2013.]

**AE** [14:40]: Okay. I'll look into that. That's really cool. This whole project is opening new worlds for me, so I'm just learning, learning, learning. Okay. You did that in 2015. When did you fully form your deejay identity?

**IS** [15:06]: When I decided that I wanted to start deejaying, I knew that I would have to start listening to different types of music because what I would play on my college radio station or show just wasn't something that you would typically hear a deejay play. So I would say I went about three years doing events for family and friends and friends of family, trying to find my sound. It started off pretty slow and melodic, and then I would use radio hits. Then I'd always been engaged in SoundCloud, so I heard remixes and I was like, "Oh, that's so cool." [15:47] I was never really a fan of going out to clubs or anything, but it's definitely just because I wasn't finding the spaces that would be enjoyable for me. Once I went to some Houston parties that are thrown by collectives, like Open Source is one, just lots of different parties. Love Tempo, which I'm now a part of, they were playing music that I found interesting and created a space that I found interesting. I've been deejaying in bars and clubs and things for about two years. I think that's when I found my current sound. It's been about two years.

**AE** [16:34]: Tell me about your deejay name.

**IS** [16:37]: My name is E\$. I do an E and a dollar sign. I came up with that actually in high school. By senior year, I remember actually signing my papers as E\$ and my teachers knew who I was. So yeah. I don't know. My name is Imani and E\$ is just a play on words. I like that it's simple.

**AE** [17:01]: Then tell me too about a collective and what that means and how you become a part of such a thing.

**IS** [17:11]: I am a part of Love Tempo [[@love.tempo](https://www.instagram.com/love.tempo)], which I met one of the people, Kenny Evans, that's a part of that, through a mutual friend. So I was invited to do a guest set and it just became official after that because we all worked so well together. I'm currently creating something called Juicebox, which is actively happening and that's a collective with people that are more like me because while I love Love Tempo, it's not exactly—it's just not me. I've joined a collective. I didn't create one. So there's a slight difference, but yeah. I love Love Tempo because they're so inclusive and accepting. Then Juicebox, which I am creating, I hope to have that same space for Black and Brown people who identify as queer, transgender, nonconforming, female, all of these people who I feel are underrepresented or not seen as much as they should be.

**AE** [18:20]: At the collective, do you—it sounds like a deejay family, where you have like-minded interests and goals and tastes. Do you perform together? Do you share resources? How do you function as a collective outside of just knowing that that's your people?

**IS** [18:42]: All of that. I can always call on people that are part of Love Tempo and ask if I need any sound equipment or anything. We always refer each other to gigs because we don't all play the same types of music. I can see the same thing happening within Juicebox, although it's very early. I'm learning a lot, actually, by being a part of Juicebox. While I'm working on our zero-tolerance policy, I'm recognizing—you always look at your own disadvantages and don't really recognize your privileges. So I'm seeing the privileges that I have more intimately and

how I can help other people with my privilege. That outreach is happening with Juicebox, which is something that's new to me but that I really enjoy doing.

**AE [19:37]:** Tell me about how you came up with the name Juicebox.

**IS [19:42]:** I just wanted something that was very fun, catchy. Yeah. I don't know. I went through a lot of names because there's all these parties and events. Juicebox has gone through an evolution for what it was meant to be to what it has become, which is just so much greater than what its intention was. Yeah. Just a fun little short name. I just thought it was catchy.

**AE [20:13]:** I was looking at my notes. I was trying to remember when y'all formed that because my question is—was Juicebox also formed in response to where we are now with [COVID-19 and] not having a lot of deejaying opportunities in bars and restaurants and starting your own virtual thing?

**IS [20:41]:** That's what it has evolved into. Juicebox, it's been about a year now since it actually started, but we haven't—since we started meeting up and creating our ideas for what Juicebox could be. We actually received a grant from the Houston Arts Alliance. It was right when we came up with the idea. We applied for the grant. It's definitely evolved since the grant application. Juicebox, the online event that's about to take place, is a result of the Houston Arts Alliance grant. Since we started doing the—our event was meant to take place in the summer. So we have to just sort of adapt, and that's what it's become.

**AE [21:28]:** Congratulations on the grant.

**IS [21:30]:** Thank you.

**AE** [21:32]: I love that the Arts Alliance is supporting all the creative people out there. I'm curious what your abstract or your pitch was for the grant. How would you describe that process?

**IS** [21:45]: As a deejay going into all of these deejay spaces, you sort of start to see the same things. Lots of white male deejays. Although the crowd is diverse, the people that are playing the music typically aren't. If they're not a white male, they're male. It's just a lack of who's giving the music. Who's playing for you? Who's creating the party? There are events and spaces in Houston that are queer spaces or queer parties, but a lot of them aren't actually run by queer people. I just feel that I wanted to create that sort of thing with Juicebox.

**AE** [22:38]: Prior to having the inspiration for Juicebox, did you run into a lot of barriers as a young black queer woman deejay?

**IS** [22:54]: It hasn't been a difficult journey, but there are definitely bars and things that I will not play at because I know that they don't accept me or my music. I'm not an outwardly queer person, so it doesn't—you look at me and you don't necessarily know. I'm not very vocal about it normally. Not to try to hide who I am, but just it's not at the forefront of my personhood. So going into these spaces, I'm just seen as a black artist mostly and I've heard, "Hey, don't play hip hop. That's not the kind of crowd we want to bring here. Don't play this sort of music." Those are the places that I don't play at, again.

**AE** [23:48]: How about the kind of landscape of deejays in Houston where you fit in as a younger generation. Is there an old school deejay mentality that you're up against that you're trying to change?

**IS** [24:06]: There are a few people in Houston that have a vinyl-only policy for deejays. I did learn on vinyl at the Supastar Spin Academy, but it's not what I use now so it's not what I'm super comfortable with. Also, it's very expensive to get to that level of deejaying. Those are typically people that have been doing it for a very long time or just have access to things like that. I feel though that most places in Houston are well aware of just the kind of barrier that that has for most deejays. If you want to get a younger crowd, you have to go with that policy. I don't think that's necessarily something I need to change. I think that's something that's happening already.

**AE** [25:02]: Let's talk about the music that you're playing. R&B, hip hop. What do you like?

**IS** [25:09]: R&B, hip hop. I would say I'm known for going through the decades pretty easily. I love Prince, so I'll always play a Prince song and bring it to the present time. I'm always jumping back and forth between decades. I do also a lot of house music and a lot of remixes, which would fall under electronic. R&B remixes, hip hop remixes. Just fun music I think is what I am bringing to the table. I'm very into pop culture. So if there's not even a full song, but —**[25:59]** For instance, I don't know if you would be familiar with this or not, but there's a song on TikTok right now that was a—it's a Russian commercial. They've chopped it up and created a song. It's like, "Meal pops. Yum, yum, yum, yum, yum." I could send it to you afterwards, but that's something that I would definitely play on one of my sets. I like to make people feel good. Make people feel like, "Oh, yeah. I'm listening to music," but also, "Oh, yeah. I know all about that. That's very funny." I like to put a little joke in there from time to time.

**AE** [26:36]: Yeah, a little surprise. Do you use TikTok as a deejay at all?

**IS** [26:42]: What do you mean by that?

**AE** [26:43]: Do you use that platform for yourself?

**IS** [26:46]: Oh, no, no, no. I'm not a TikToker. No. **[Laughs]**

**AE** [26:51]: I have a ten-year-old daughter. She's definitely a TikToker, so I know a little bit about the platform but not that song. Okay. Let's talk about some of your residency and places where you've performed. Axelrad. Other venues that you have a relationship with.

**IS** [27:13]: Mostly Axelrad. Love Tempo was previously at—oh my goodness. Oh, my gosh. Now I would say I'm mostly at Axelrad because Love Tempo has made the transition to Axelrad as well. So while I have my own day at Axelrad, I'm also there with Love Tempo. But that doesn't mean that I don't play in other spaces, but they're typically events or guest spots. So I've been to Present Company. I've been—I've played at Project Row Houses for their events. Before I started finding my sound, I did actually a lot of art events. So I've done FotoFest. I've done a lot of different little bars. I've done some on Almeda. Yeah. In my mind, it's just always Axelrad that I play at. So I don't really, unfortunately, pay attention to my resume of places that I've played, but there's been a few. Most of them, not bars or clubs, but like event spaces.

**AE** [28:35]: Tell me too about your collaborations with Moe Penders mutual friend and Emily Areta at FotoFest. I taught with Literacy Through Photography for a while and I know Emily from that. Are those creative circles in Houston overlapping? Do you get inspiration from working with an organization like FotoFest or other ways that those collaborations influence your deejay work?

**IS [29:06]:** I'm more influenced by people than institutions. Working with Moe and Emily, who are both Latin, has opened my world to a lot of different types of music just through Emily. Then from Moe, lots of awareness for things that I haven't really been paying attention to. Moe and I are collectively doing the Juicebox Instagram, where we have to really do a deep dive into the zero-tolerance policy. I think we're both learning, but we're also both teaching each other as we create these captions. The more you learn, the more you grow. Whether you know it or not, it's going to have some impact on how I play my music and how I do my creative work.

**AE [30:00]:** Not that you would be inspired by FotoFest as an organization, but since Moe is a photographer, you're working with visual content on Instagram, is there an overlap there where you're seeing imagery differently having known and worked with them or —

**IS [30:18]:** I've been immersed in arts my whole life, mostly since I've been in middle school. I was introduced to Project Row Houses through my aunt who worked there[, Cheryl Florence]. I've done summer programs with other organizations. I went abroad when I was in high school to study photography for a while. I had friends that are deeply interested in photography. These things have been influences for me my entire life, and I can't really see where the line is between how it has or has not influenced me because it's just so ingrained in who I am. Yeah. There's definitely a different perspective working with people like Moe and Emily and also Sidney [Mori], who I met through Project Row Houses, who's another part of Juicebox too. Sidney Garrett, who's also a photographer and curator.

**AE [31:21]:** Let's go back and tell me about Juicebox's zero tolerance.

**IS** [31:28]: I don't really enjoy using this word, but it's—we just wanted to create a safe space or just a space for people to feel comfortable. I don't like the idea of a safe space because it sounds like it's censored in a way. The zero tolerance policy is just to ensure that people are not—just for people to if they haven't already, acknowledge their ignorances and just be—just be respectful throughout the whole event. Hopefully they're learning as well while they're engaging with us.

**AE** [32:13]: Yeah. I registered for the Juicebox Hoedown on August 22nd. Is that it?

**IS** [32:20]: Oh, nice. Yes.

**AE** [32:25]: Yeah. Why is that through Eventbrite? How do you organize how you're announcing and planning and evolving a virtual event?

**IS** [32:37]: Eventbrite is a platform used by several deejays that are throwing events, but we primarily went through this route to get email addresses from everyone that would like to attend because I'm sure you're familiar with all of the Zoom bombings that are happening. So we just want to make it as safe as possible to try to avoid things like that. So that's primarily what it means. Yeah.

**AE** [33:13]: I had a Zoom-bombing experience at the beginning of all this, and it was NOT pleasant.

**IS** [33:09] Wow.

**AE** [33:10] So tell me how since March, after the world has changed with the lockdown, coronavirus, Texas, our governor [Greg Abbott], tell me how that has changed and influenced what you do.

**IS** [33:34]: I've had to go digital, which is not something that I'm—when I deejay, I like to engage with the audience and feed off of their energy for what I'm playing because it just—it's like a give-and-take sort of profession, at least for me. When I have to do these things digitally, I don't get that engagement. So it's very different for me, and I've had to really adapt. Toward the beginning of this, I did a lot of Instagram Lives, where I would just play for a few hours and have people give donations just because a lot of people were missing going out and having that feeling, so I did my best to share that with people. **[34:22]** I did Takeout Fest, which was a part of Juicebox, but that was more a city of Houston thing to bring everyone together. All of the deejays that I knew—or not all, but a lot of them that I knew, I asked to participate in this twelve-hour festival online. I mean on Instagram. The idea was that at any point of the day, if you wanted to hear music, you could go on Instagram and someone would be playing. I think that was very successful, and I found myself to be more of like an organizer during quarantine rather than a person that's just playing, which has been pretty fun.

**AE** [35:04]: Good. I love how you presented that at the Takeout Fest, where you had the profiles of each day and then a little quote about how they would use money that ended up in their tip jar on CashApp or whatever because it's hard for people to earn a living right now. Can you talk about how that's affected you personally?

**IS** [35:29]: I'm not solely a deejay. It's not my only job, but it does make up a significant amount of my income, so I've been without that for a while and it's been pretty difficult but not debilitating. So I'm thankful for that, but I know that's not the case for many other people. Other deejays. Yeah. I wanted to give them that platform to get the help that they needed to let people really see that we as deejays were—things were very different and that we need help. Yeah. I've been affected financially, but it hasn't been debilitating for me.

**AE** [36:12]: May I ask what else you do for a living?

**IS** [36:16]: I currently work at Project Row Houses. Yeah, as a docent.

**AE** [36:22]: Cool. Who's your aunt who works at Project Row House?

**IS** [36:29]: My aunt's name is Cheryl Florence, but she's no longer there. She worked there before I came. So she was my introduction, but through her I actually met Ryan Dennis who's the former curator, and she's the one that offered me the position in my senior year of college.

**AE** [36:52]: Yeah, I know Ryan a little bit. I lived in Mississippi for a long time. She just moved to Mississippi.

**IS** [36:58]: Yeah. How was that? Your time in Mississippi.

**AE** [37:01]: It was good. I went there for graduate school, got a degree in cultural studies and that's where I started doing oral history fieldwork and documentary work. I was there for thirteen years and then came back because my mom's here. I'm an only child, and family stuff brought me back. But I loved it, and I hated it. It's a complicated place, but it's really special and unique

in a lot of ways too. I've been all over Ryan's Instagram to see what she's doing and who she's talking to. I hope she's—.

**IS** [37:33]: I remember. She's very unfamiliar with Mississippi.

**AE** [37:38]: Yeah. It can be a shock to the system, but I hope she's really getting a lot out of it. The [Mississippi Museum of Art] is lucky to have her. Okay. Let's talk about right before lockdown in March, you got to meet [rapper, actress] Cardi B. Tell me about that.

**IS** [37:59]: I met Cardi B at the rodeo when she came, which is one of the largest rodeo events and it was so crazy. I've really started believing in manifestation since that happened because I had been tweeting for days, "Oh my gosh. I really want to go to this Cardi B concert." Yada, yada, yada. One of my cousins who's a very distant cousin—she is our grandparents—our brother and sister. We reconnected or we connected at U of H [University of Houston] because we had a class together and it was like, oh, cool, I get to get closer to one of my cousins that I don't really know that well. She actually had seen my tweets and she had a connection to—I mean the studio that works with Cardi B. They gave her two tickets to go to the concert and then to also meet Cardi B afterwards. It was a shock to me, but it was awesome.

**AE** [39:13]: Yeah. What was it like?

**IS** [39:16]: She is everything that she presents herself to be. It was very cool. Actually, one of the cooler things that happened is that we were standing in line to meet her and the person right in front of me was [the gymnast] Simone Biles. So I got to meet both of them in the same night. I was like, "This is unreal." I gave Cardi B a lollipop, which is a reference to the song that she had

out at the time which is, "Lolli poppin, twerkin in some Js," with Bruno Mars. She's just like, "Oh, thank you." It was pretty fun.

**AE [39:54]:** Oh my gosh. That's so amazing. What a different world that was just in March for you to have an experience like that. If I had known, I would be going to every event, every concert, every show.

**IS [40:08]:** I know. Yeah.

**AE [40:08]:** What do you think—being hopeful about the future, what do you think being a deejay in Houston and collectives that you're with, what is that going to look like on the other side of this? What do you hope to see happen?

**IS [40:30]:** After COVID? I hope that Juicebox and the things that I'm doing in quarantine become these sort of community spaces that have welcomed me into deejaying and be that space for other people to enter into what they want to do or what they're interested in. I'm very inspired by something called Soulection, which I'm not sure if you're familiar with, but my time as a college deejay, I would listen to their show on SoundCloud. They started as a college show, and they do these hour-long things where they just play music that they found. **[41:22]** Since then, it's been about five years. Five or six years. They've created this whole community. They're very big. They have a show on Apple Radio now or Beats One Radio. They do tours throughout the world. Not only in America. They have deejays that are signed with them. They have artists that are signed with them. I don't really see it as a record label, but I guess that's what it is. They've sort of just really made themselves appear like a community. I don't aspire to do those exact things, but I would love to create that sense of community like they have on a wider scale.

**AE** [42:10]: I see it. What is something that people assume about deejays that—or is there anything that people think they know about what you do that is really wrong? What do you wish they knew?

**IS** [42:28]: Okay. I wish more people knew that deejays are not playlists. We're not Spotify. We're not Apple Music. We're not a jukebox. I appreciate requests. I understand the need for requests at times. I don't want to continue to play—and I think most deejays would agree that it's like, "Please don't continue to ask me to play certain songs." I think that's the primary thing. Just like appreciate the art that goes into deejaying and not try to dictate what you expect a deejay to be.

**AE** [43:12]: Tell me about when you're deejaying—say you're at Axelrad one night, you've got all this light production around you and this great audience. What does it feel like when you're in the zone? What is going on with you when you're really into what you're doing at that moment?

**IS** [43:34]: When I'm deep in my zone, the music just flows through me. There are different ways to go about deejaying, but I don't make setlists most of the time. I go in not really knowing what I'm going to play. I really feel the energy. And when I'm in my zone, I just—It's like a matched energy, I'm connected with the crowd, they're connected with me, and it just flows out. All the songs. I look up occasionally. See people dance. I'm like, "Oh, what will they dance to next? Oh, well —." It's really like nice kind of—not controlling, but moving the crowd along in different ways through music.

**AE** [44:27]: How do you compensate for that on Instagram? All these virtual events and things.

**IS** [44:32]: It is extremely hard for me at least. Just doing it digitally, you have to rely on what it is that you want to do or what I want to do in that moment. You can see the comment section, but it's just not as interactive. Even through Zoom events that I've done, you can't—It's hard to see on the grid how people are feeling. So it's just been mostly what I'm interested in at the moment and what I would like to play at the moment. What's happened digitally.

**AE** [45:09]: Yeah. I interviewed an actor for this project, Brandon Morgan. I don't know if you're familiar with him, but he was talking about this frustration where you actually really need an audience to get energy off of. Even just this conversation right now, it would be so different if we were in the same room together. You know, just the energy would be different. It's just crazy how we've all had to adapt. I think we're adapting well. Maybe too well. It can be kind of scary sometimes, but I'm getting the feeling like when everything is safe and everybody can go out that all the parties are going to be happening. All the deejays are going to be busy. Everybody's just going to be *ready* for that moment.

**IS** [45:56]: Yeah.

**AE** [45:57]: Tell me as an artist in Houston what it is about the city that you respond to or are inspired by or —.

**IS** [46:08]: Since I've been in Houston my whole life, I've lived in different parts of Houston, north and south. It's very diverse. I've gone to schools with a pretty diverse population my whole life, so not only Carnegie, but I also went to Lanier Middle School and Oak Forest Elementary School. So just engaging with all of these different sorts of people has really influenced the type

of music I play because I want to be inclusive in my music, so I intentionally look for Latin music, although it's not what I primarily listen to in my own time. I have very good friends that are Latin. I ask them for their input because I want to be a source for everyone. I have some Indian music that I play. Yeah, I'm just really trying to make not only the people that I connect with or I'm familiar with to feel good when they hear my sets, but I want everyone to kind of enjoy it.

**AE [47:24]:** Yeah. You mentioned earlier that you're as passionate about food as you are music. Where do you like to eat?

**IS [47:32]:** Oh my goodness. Houston is also, throughout my travels definitely, one of the top cities when it comes to food. It's a joy to eat in Houston. I always have trouble, though, if I have friends that are visiting, knowing where to take them because there's just so many options. I know one of my favorites is Aga's for Indian food. It's on the southwest side. So delicious. I love Tacos A Go Go just for a quick run to a taco place, but I also love the food trucks that we have. We have so many food trucks. There's a food truck right by me in the East End that serves tortas and tacos and quesadillas. There's so much food. I love Creole Cajun food. BB's is a good spot. Everything. I love ramen.

**AE [48:37]:** Yeah, we're spoiled, for sure. Okay. Just a couple more questions. One is: What do you feel like you need right now as a deejay that you don't have or wish you had access to?

**IS [48:56]:** I'm fortunate to have these collectives, as we were talking about, that grant me access to things that I may not have. For example, virtually deejaying through Zoom and on Instagram to get the best sound quality, you need certain equipment. I've been able to borrow that from my

friends. Since I don't know how long this will go on or how long that I'll be doing things virtually, I'm not—I wouldn't say that I need that right now since I have access to it. So I'm pretty set on things that I need, but I'm always interested in engaging with more people. So I'd love to have more customers, as you call them, or just people to play with my music. I am struggling—not struggling. I am making less money, financially. So any help with engaging with me in that way is nice.

**AE** [49:58]: I have to ask you what the records are on your wall behind you.

**IS** [50:03]: Oh, so I have several records that are stacked this way so only one in the front [of a stack], but that one on that side [points over her left shoulder] is Trina Slip-N-Slide. She's a Miami rapper. And then this one right here [points over her right shoulder] is A Tribe Called Quest, *People's Instinctive Travels in the Paths of Rhythm*, who I grew up listening to through my dad who's a really huge hip hop fan. I have some gospel records on that side [on the wall to her right]. I did grow up in church, and my grandfather [Garfield Flores] actually passed a few years ago, and that's from his collection. And I have a Megan Thee Stallion up there just because she's from Houston, and I enjoy her music.

**AE** [50:55]: Up with the gospel. I love it. **[Laughs]**

**IS** [50:58]: **[Laughs]** Everything is connected.

**AE** [51:01]: It is. It is. Oh my god. All right. Well Imani, man, I can't thank you enough for your time today. I wonder if there's anything that we haven't talked about that you want to mention or a final thought about deejaying in Houston in the summer of 2020.

**IS [51:23]:** One thing that we haven't covered is, I would say that doing things virtually has given me a confidence that I wouldn't have with talking to people in person or just even engaging with them without things being virtual. It's really given me this boost to go after what you want. For Takeout Fest, for example, we had a guest deejay whose name is Simon Says, who I'm a huge fan of. He does lots of remixes that I use in my sets. I had the confidence to ask him if he wanted to be a part of it, and I feel like a lot of people are very open to saying yes and to doing things virtually because it's just such an environment that no one is familiar with. I want to do all things. I mean engage in whatever ways you can to see what works best for you. He said yes. We've asked a lady named DJ Hourglass from Atlanta to work with us for Juicebox. So it's just given me the courage to go after what I want more vigorously.

**AE [52:47]:** Yes! I think it's true, too, that people also just have time. You know?

**IS [52:54]:** Yeah.

**AE [52:55]:** Everybody has time to fill, so it's easier to make those connections, and people are also craving connection. So we're doing the best we can virtually, but it's just been an interesting byproduct of this crazy place we find ourselves in that good things are happening. It's going to be so interesting to reflect on it once we get past it. Thank you so much, Imani. I've learned so much from this conversation, and I'm really glad to know you a little bit better. Thank you for being a part of this project.

**IS [53:26]:** Thank you so much for having me. I hope that I answered all of the questions well. Kind of ramble sometimes, but thank you for having me. **[Laughs]**

**[END]**