

**SHELVIS PONDS:** In this episode, we sit with Pierce Freelon to discuss the importance of space, particularly his creation of Blackspace, a local digital makerspace for Black and Brown youth. For Pierce, Blackspace came out of his realization that not all space is equal, thus creating the need to forge a space where Black and Brown youth can thrive.

**Pierce, I first want to know: What is Blackspace? What is Blackspace and what does it seek to do?**

**PIERCE FREELON:** Blackspace is a digital makerspace based in Downtown Durham at the American Underground, we also have a studio in Chapel Hill on Franklin Street. We seek to create a breathing space for children of African descent where they can create, build, tinker, wonder, explore any medium as we try to co-create what freedom and liberation looks like as Black folks. And we do that and lead that exploration through the digital arts mostly. You know coding, music production, sound design, but also poetry - The Cyphers, the weekly event that we do, we do an open mic. We just want kids to feel like they can breathe and be unapologetic and creative as we attempt to, in the words of Octavia Butler, great Afrofuturist, shape change in this world.

**SHELVIS PONDS:** I see, so freedom and liberation - those two words are sitting with me, particularly as it pertains to using your art, using music, using coding, visual arts, which I'm looking around and I see some really cool visual arts. How do you think they participate in bringing forth a mindset or even just a reality of liberation?

**PIERCE FREELON:** Well, for me, Black liberation isn't something that we've seen yet and so as folks dedicated to ideas like freedom, we need to be able to dream and to imagine and to envision what that world looks like so we can manifest it. So one of the things like Blackspace, one of our logos or icons is an

Afronaut, and that is 'Afronaut' like an African astronaut, you know. I think of what we do here as a breathing space we create like an atmosphere, literally, figuratively, we burn sage, we burn palo santo, we make sure that when kids walk into the space it feels like they can exhale, they can take a deep breath. A lot of these structures out here, we've learned from Black feminists that there exists not just racism and patriarchy and sexism, but that they're interlocked and oppression is intersectional and so when we want to dream about creating like a breathing space, you need to put your creative lense on to be able to envision that, in order to manifest that, in order to experience that in slivers, because out there if you're black on a predominantly white campus and dealing with microaggressions, if you're a woman trying to go jogging at night, if you're queer in a space where homophobic lyrics are popping on the radio, those things can be very literally asphyxiating, it can take the breath out your lungs and it can be depressing or it can be assaulting or distressing and so we hope to create a space where we don't have to deal with any of that and so when we start from that point, what does it look like to feel, and to engage and to create amongst each other as Black folks doing our best to keep those things at bay in this space and to me the metaphor of a mask and a suit, a protective environment and atmosphere for liberation to be tasted and experimented on and experienced - that's the source from which we are going to spring forward and say, "We're not going to deal with this, we know what the alternative situation can be like. The alternative learning environment can be like, we've dreamed up better situations than this one". And I feel like there isn't an ancestor out there, name one that wasn't a dreamer for their time and the obvious cliché would be Martin Luther King Jr. "I Had a Dream", we hear that every Black History Month, that's in the McDonald's commercial "I Have a Dream", but take it back like Ella Baker - what type of world was she dreaming, what type of alternate reality was Pauli Murray talking about, Episcopal preacher queer Black? What planet are you living on, Harriet Tubman? You are on some other sh-- as we need to be if we want to see through what we

currently got towards something that where we need to go and I think that is what one of the things that Blackspace attempts to do is set a new standard so that we can tap into our imagination and create better systems and dream up better alternatives to the world that we currently occupy.

**SHELVIS PONDS:** Brother, that's real. I'm intrigued by this concept Afrofuturism. I recently heard it, and I want to know if you'd be willing to expound upon it. Afrofuturism, I think you mentioned Octavia Butler as associated with that way of thinking.

**PIERCE FREELON:** Yeah, Octavia is a preeminent science fiction author and often writes about dystopian futures and was a prophet, I think she was a prophet, like Tupac was a prophet and Nina Simone is a prophet, we have so many prophets out of the Black radical tradition that gives us glimpses into the future, that give us alternative ways to flip things in the present, that give us a clear lens of what's going on and where we need to go and where we've been - they're time travelers these prophets. And when I think of Afrofuturism, I think about Black folks putting themselves in the driver seat of our collective spaceship as a species. We need the people who've been suffering and struggling the most to be at the forefront of creating strategies and solutions for how to get through this mess. And Afrofuturist paradigm - it's tied to science fiction and to music and people like Funkadelic and Sun Ra, writers like Octavia Butler and filmmakers like Coogler! Ryan Coogler. When I think about his [Ryan Coogler's] career it's interesting, I remember when *Fruitvale Station* came out - what an important film for both of their careers, but also to tell the story. I don't remove that from Colin Kaepernick and from the movement for Black lives. We need stories and storytellers to help us come rally around issues of social justice and of Black liberation and so even before that he had an amazing film and he [Coogler] was still a student and he reminds me of - Coogler was an athlete in college, a football player in California - it reminds me of Ernie Barnes,

the Durham native who played pro-football and then quit the sport to be a painter and ended up painting “The Sugar Shack” painting, which was based in the Durham Armory. That was the setting for that beautiful painting, which was the cover of Marvin Gaye’s *I Want You* album that was on the beginning of “Good Times” -- iconic painting from this football player from Durham who was a celebrity and an icon in his own right as an athlete, but was also an artist and a creative. And Ryan Coogler, in my mind, steps into that tradition of the Jim Browns and others that have stepped out of the sports arena to do not just creative work, but important, political creative work. So in grad school he had this short film called “Locks”, it was about a brother - spoiler alert – brothers, like, walking around basically being racially profiled and he cuts his hair and as he walks out there’s all these dreads like looking at him like, “Man, like I get it, but damn man this is rough”. And then when he gets home, he takes his bag of hair and he throws it at his sister and she looks at him and starts crying and she takes her wig off and come to find out that he was shaving his head to be in solidarity with her because she had cancer, not because of the stereotypes, which do exist. It’s a silent film, there’s no dialogue, all of this is just told through facial expression and gesture and walking, basically the film is he leaves home, walks to the barbershop and comes back, but you could see the cops having brothers up on the street and people, so great storyteller. To me, *Black Panther* makes complete sense, people think like these kids came out of nowhere, but there’s actually a lot of work that has gone in - a career of excellence, a career of discipline, a career of consciousness, a lifetime of thoughtful introspection. Now, when I think about Blackspace, what I’m trying to do is like nurture baby Cooglers who are going to do that work, because a lot of us, individually--if we come up in the right family, in the right zip code, if we have the right lucky draw of resources--we might have, like I did, a dad who is an architect, a mom who is a singer: people who nurture us in the arts and encourage us to be creative. A lot of my creative friends haven’t even had those kinds of resources, they’re bucking against their parents who are telling them to get a real job, or

be a lawyer or doctor, go to college, do the right thing - we don't have a lot of spaces as Black folks to be weird and creative and to be free. We don't have the leeway to be able to step outside of a traditional lifestyle and still have viable opportunities to be successful and to make mistakes and take a gap year, or try this out for a little bit to see if I like it. Those are not the types of opportunities that are available to us given capitalism and white supremacy and greed and I was gonna say gerrymandering, well yeah gerrymandering but also redlining, you name it, what situation haven't we been through as a people that gives us very little wiggle room, but what you find is that when you give kids access to that, just the sparks are amazing, there such deep wealth springs of creativity energy and thought within each of us that oftentimes go untapped or are discouraged. I gotta tell you a story, today I was at Brogden Middle School and my band, The Beast, we do workshops in schools, so we do gigs but another big part of what The Beast does is through the Durham Arts Council we do workshops. So I had two yesterday in Raleigh and I had one today, actually it wasn't Raleigh it was Clayton, which is rural North Carolina. It can be tough out there sometimes because the whole curriculum is about Black music and a lot of these [schools] are predominantly white. Once you get out of the urban areas, there's definitely rural Black communities, but it's a lot of rural areas, let's just leave it at that. But anyway, this morning it was crazy because I was - side story about yesterday - teaching the kids about three elements of Black music, those are: storytelling, improvisation and color response. And while I'm listing these three things off, the kids are in crowd going like this - which is the hand signal for white power, you can't see it because it's a podcast. Three fingers up almost like a okay sign, but the thumb sticks out to make a 'P' and makes a 'WP' and it stands for white power, it's a Ku Klux Klan, a nazi thing. That's the kind of thing that we encounter when we're doing this workshop out in rural North Carolina, but that's a sidebar, but also those are the types of comments that many Black kids who live in these rural areas have to live in on the daily, which is why spaces like Blackspace we don't even have to deal with

that because we're here with each other that's what makes this a breathing space, because you got kids in your classroom who are whatever not trying to let you live literally and figuratively. So anyway, that was yesterday. Today, different story I'm in Brogden Middle School it's a Black and Latinx primarily school, actually Brogden I don't know maybe Brogden is an elementary school I can't remember. Anyway, we were at Brogden, it's in North Durham and we were performing our songs and we're encouraging the kids to like, there's one song in particular, we're encouraging the kids to get up and dance and then from that song through a whole set, every time we'd play music they would get up and dance and that's not normally how it happens, usually they dance when we tell them to dance and usually they're suppose to sit down. Oftentimes, teachers will flock in and try to tell them to settle down - you're not suppose to dance, but this school's really laid back - there were teachers getting up dancing with the kids - it was beautiful.

**SHELVIS PONDS:** This is a predominantly Black and Latinx school?

**PIERCE FREELON:** Predominantly Black and Latinx school and it was dope. So, at the end of the workshop, I went and told the principal, "Yo, I love how you didn't stop the kids from dancing". They were dancing to jazz music, we played "When the Saints Go Marching In" because the curriculum starts with spirituals, first of all, we'd play them some original songs, hip-hop, then we'd take them back where like spirituals were first. First of all, our ancient West African griots - they were just storytellers so I'd kick a verse acapella, then we go spirituals, we'd play "Amazing Grace" we'd do jazz, we're playing reggae and we end with hip-hop and kind of like shows them the trajectory that Black music has taken over the past five hundred years or whatever. Anyway, the point is the kids were dancing and oftentimes, Black and Brown kids express themselves in ways that are different from other kids and other schools, and a lot of times what you see especially in schools where there are white teachers

teaching Black kids--they don't always understand the cultural nuisances, they don't always understand the ways that we communicate, the ways that we learn differently from other children, it's a different situation. What his name? Chris Edmond wrote a book for white teachers teaching Black kids in the hood, it's a great book, ya'll should check that out, you should bring him to Just Space. He's a really dope educator, but they just let them be themselves and let them celebrate in the ways that they wanted to celebrate. They were flossing, they were Orange Justicing doing all they dances to Jazz music over a solo and I was like, "Oh man, this was probably how it used to be back when Jazz was popular music and "When the Saints Go Marching In" was how they used to turnup in the red light districts in New Orleans, like this is probably what it used to be like. Now, Jazz is one of those "Oh, okay".

**SHELVIS PONDS: Sophisticated**

**PIERCE FREELON: You know what I mean? I got my wine, I paid \$25 dollars for my ticket. The median age is like sixty. You know what I mean? But here, kids are rocking out to Jazz. I say that to say that's also a Just Space, that's also creating a Blackspace-like atmosphere in a school environment that might not always be conducive to celebrating or even allowing Black joy to occur because the other school in Cary, you make one peep they might yank you out the classroom in a heartbeat. So giving us room to be us and do us.**

**SHELVIS PONDS: Move the body.**

**PIERCE FREELON: Move the body.**

**SHELVIS PONDS: Don't be afraid of the body.**

**PIERCE FREELON:** I think that's what kids need in order to feel nurtured and heard and seen and like home. There's no accountability, it's just coming from a place of love - love is one of our two principles: it's love and the Black whole nurturing the Black whole. We say channeling love and nurturing the Black whole and all of our Blackness. And if we're not even as facilitators - decipher whatever Blackspace does - if we're not leading with love then we got to check ourselves. If we're not accepting Blackness and all of its wonder, we got to check ourselves and when we are doing those things, say, "Oh! Blackspace is hitting right now!" You know what I mean? So, we're creating a Blackspace, that's what a Blackspace is.

**SHELVIS PONDS:** In fact, I feel free. How do kids get in Blackspace? Is it word-of-mouth? I want to hear about how they get in? But also, is it like a curriculum? Are there levels? Do you graduate from Blackspace? Do you have to achieve certain things? Are there art and music you specialize?

**PIERCE FREELON:** Yes, I'll answer all those questions. First, how you get in, we started in 2016, actually we started in 2014 in Chapel Hill. That was right across from a teen center that worked mostly with middle school-aged kids. Once they got out of the teen side, they came across the hallway to Blackspace. It was kind of like a pipeline through their teen center is how we recruited kids. When we opened up the Durham spot, I've been doing works with teens in Durham since I was nineteen years old. I was a freshman in high school and took my first Black Studies class and I say, "Yo, they're dropping gems that I never got in Social Studies, English or History class at Durham School of the Arts here in Durham". So I created this, one of my professors was like, "I want the kids at my school to know what I just learned". So I created this curriculum it was called "Blackademics", it was basically like teaching stuff that I learned in African-American Studies in college at DSA, they had just added like a Minority Studies class and I came for like a week. So anyways, I've been doing

work in schools since I was nineteen, I'm thirty-four years old. So, a lot of the relationships I've developed with teachers, doing workshops in schools like Brogden, I've done the workshop we did today at Brogden, it was like a forty-five minute school assembly style workshop, I've done that in every school in Durham country almost, maybe not Jordan. But, every high school, every middle school, every elementary school has seen this curriculum - ninety percent of them. So, in that process, I always mention Blackspace, I always meet teachers who are interested, I'm recruiting kids, we do a recruiting meeting at DCA every year, twice a year, we do events, The Cypher is an opportunity for us to recruit kids, kids come up like, "Oh, what is this?" "We run a community center for teens, it's right there, like right behind where we do The Cypher". Collect their emails, talk to their parents, we're just out here. I would say mostly word-of-mouth, we don't put ads in the paper or anything, but you see how big the space is, you can't fit twelve people in this room. If we did too much more than word-of-mouth, we would be bursting at the seams. So one of our goals moving forward is to scale beyond what this space will allow, it's restrictive how small it is, but it's also created a lot of opportunity for us, so I'm not complaining, we're at capacity already just through word-of mouth. But we recruit through our events and with our programming and through just my network: having important schools and community centers and then Church basements and at the Mosque. Born and raised in this community, I've been able to get the word out. Grassroots.

**SHELVIS PONDS:** Well, I guess final question, a final formal question I'd say is what do you see as the future of Blackspace? Like what's your hope?

**PIERCE FREELON:** One of my hopes is, I want Blackspace to be a passport for Black kids in Durham and I mean that literally, like you come to Blackspace at 13, we serve mostly 13-19, by the time you're a senior, you actually have a physical passport with a passport photo and a stamp in it. We're going to

Ghana, we're go to Haiti, we're going to Senegal doing the same stuff we do here with kids internationally. That's what I did with Beat Making Lab, I've been to more countries than I can name doing this type of work in places like Senegal or Ethiopia and Kenya and Panama and Dominican Republic and Haiti and after doing that work for several years, I was just really like this is great for me, but I was travelling the world when I was in middle school, my mom is a singer, I've been to Japan and Finland all before high school I was travelling internationally. I don't need more stamps on my passport, you know, but what can Blackspace institutionally do to not only open kids' minds to what pan-Africanism looks like in means as a people of the African diaspora reconnecting with our cousins in Haiti and Kenya and Ghana, but actually to go there and for them to see for themselves, travel is transformative, it's transformative and one of the many goals, I got a lot of plans for Blackspace, but one of them is to take annual pilgrimages to Black countries with kids from Durham and have the come do their work, the same Cypher you see out there we'll be doing that in Ghana and then when they come back, they're gonna have that experience and that world view and that kind of a access and that perspective that they can bring back to their people. And we've done many versions of that, we took some kids to Detroit, we took like fifty-five people to D.C. to see the Smithsonian Museum, so we've gotten kids out of Durham. We took a group of Black women to San Francisco for Brave New Voices, we get out, we do a little bit of space travel. But I'm trying to get passport stamps, that's like next on my lists of things to accomplish through Blackspace. I'm going to go ahead to put that out there for 2019/2020. Put a slash in it. 19/20 we've already done Haiti, Haiti included some kids from Blackspace, but it was just one kid, I want to bring a squad.

**SHELVIS PONDS:** Pierce Freelon! Is there anything else?

**PIERCE FREELON:** No, man, I'm good. Come through to Cypher.

**SHELVIS PONDS:** I want to come through The Cypher, I've been to several of them.

**PIERCE FREELON:** Yeah, I know you have been.

**SHELVIS PONDS:** I want this thing that you wear.

**PIERCE FREELON:** Which one?

**SHELVIS PONDS:** I don't even know what you call it, it's not a Dashiki. It's like a robe.

**PIERCE FREELON:** Oh, the green one?

**SHELVIS PONDS:** I don't know if it's green or brown,

**PIERCE FREELON:** I've got several African print.

**SHELVIS PONDS:** Bro, I want that bad. I literally walked downtown to try and get it. Where'd you get that?

**PIERCE FREELON:** Wow, I don't know which item you're talking about. I have so many African things that I've picked up over the years. I mean most of my stuff, I get from Durham. Have you ever been to Ngozi?

**SHELVIS PONDS:** Yes.

**PIERCE FREELON:** I got a - they had this big ol' green mudcloth print jacket, big one.

**SHELVIS PONDS:** That's maybe what it was because it looked burlap, it looked like a certain cloth.

**PIERCE FREELON:** This is like my cloth material.

**SHELVIS PONDS:** That's what it was, yes! That material.

**PIERCE FREELON:** Yeah, I've got that at home. It's good for the winter. I got my little bubble tonight for The Cypher, but it's good to layer up with your ancestors that's nice. They do custom stuff down there, you should get measured.

**SHELVIS PONDS:** I bought something two months ago, I loved it.

**PIERCE FREELON:** I've been asking them to make me this scarf that I found online.

**SHELVIS PONDS:** Pierce is interviewed by Shelvis Ponds. All editing for this episode has been done by Kyle Kubovic. The outreach coordinator for this episode is Esra Uzun Mason. Today's music is called "Power Man" by "The Beast," a local Durham music group to which Pierce belongs. This production is made possible by the Division of Student Affairs at Duke University.