

THE RESISTANCE – EPISODE 1.11

Fantastic Negrito interview – Episode Transcript

You know, nothing's perfect. And there's going to be a price for everything. And I think in creating this body of work, part of the loneliness is the price.

[theme music]

Matt: Welcome to The Resistance: a podcast that features honest discussion with meaningful artists about the opposing forces we all face when moving toward our better selves. I'm your host, Matt Conner.

I'd wager a guess that the vast majority of us have an unhealthy relationship with resistance. If you're like me, you allow procrastination a place at your table. You let fear in the door quite a ways, and you use excuses of varying degrees to explain why you haven't made progress. For me, the resistance is no stranger to winning. But there are some people for whom the resistance is nothing more than a formidable foe: a suitable challenger, against which we are all able to suit up. For these folks, resistance is just something that makes the victory sweeter in the end, the tension that makes the story worth telling.

Fantastic Negrito is one such person. A dynamic, one-man musical wrecking crew, whose last two albums have won the Grammy award for Best New Contemporary Blues Album. He's an innovative genius with a dynamic musical fusion that mixes gospel and funk, rock and soul, blues and hip hop. And if that sounds spirited, the music's got nothing on the man himself. Fantastic Negrito is able to speak with such clarity and create with such focus because, as he puts it, he's already lived three lives. Each life was marked by tremendous amounts of resistance, from being in a coma to losing the use of his hand. Yet each stage required him to learn to get back up again from the bottom.

A man will either eventually cave under such pressure or come alive to the fact that he's capable of anything. For Fantastic Negrito, resistance means pressure, and pressure produces diamonds. And in the mouth of any other man, this would sound like a trite cliché. But he's lived the life and earned the credibility to say whatever he wants.

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Rather than fill you in on all the incredible details, we'll just let this inimitable artist tell you himself. You're in for an unforgettable conversation with one of music's most charismatic persons. Here's our chat with Fantastic Negrito.

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Matt: Hello, and welcome to The Resistance. My name is Matt Conner, and I'm your host. Today, I'm thrilled to have with me Fantastic Negrito in the studio. How are you doing today?

Fantastic Negrito: I like my chances. It's good to be here. There's only one Fantastic Negrito in the world, as you all know, and right now, I'm here with Matt Conner.

Matt: Appreciate you taking some time out. Welcome to The Resistance. It's a podcast based on a book by Steven Pressfield called *The War of Art*, in which we all face the distance between who we are and who we say we want to be. Let me read to you just a couple quick sentences, and then I would love for you to tell me sort of how that resonates with you, or how you wrestle with that just right now, to get us going.

Fantastic Negrito: Okay.

Matt: He says, "Most of us have two lives: the life we live, and the unlive life within us. Between the two stands resistance." I'd love to know how you're wrestling with that right now. Like what does resistance look like in the life of Fantastic Negrito at the end of 2018?

Fantastic Negrito: Well, Fantastic Negrito, I've lived three lives. And there was resistance in between all of them, from being the kid from Oakland, California, growing up in the crack era when it was decimating the community that I lived in, and taking people's lives. That was a great amount of resistance growing up in that particular situation. But that resistance produced genius music and art form. And it produced Too Short, and it produced E-40, and it produced Tony! Toni! Toné! MC Hammer. *En Vogue*. Even, you could say Green Day and Metallica. They all came from that era.

So I used that resistance, always, for growth, because that's, for me, resistance equals growth. I say take that bullshit and turn it into good shit. And that's all about growth and resistance.

Matt: You mentioned three lives. What was the second?

Fantastic Negrito: Oh, the second. You say, now that we're in it, let's do it. It's like I'm telling you about this amazing food, and then I say, hey, you wanna take the garbage out? All right. So.

All right. Sorry about that. I am an artist. I'm not a very good guest.

So my first life was surviving that. Because that turned me into a monster. That turned me into a guy that wanted everything. He wanted the world. I saw how the local hustlers and drug dealers were driving the best looking cars and slant-nosed Porsches. And having the prettiest women and having the money, so I wanted that. So I turned my energy to Los Angeles. A place where you can get all that stuff.

So I went out there to make my demo tape and become some big pop star, as I wanted. And with the willpower and being a product of resistance in the dope era, is I turned that into a \$1 million dollar record deal advance from Interscope Records, and I was signed directly by a guy named Jimmy Iovene, which some of you all know now. And my first managers were Prince's managers. So I went from the streets of Oakland, with all that hustling and resistance, and it taught me the resilience, which is what resistance does to you. It teaches you how to overcome

the many obstacles that are coming your way, whether it's death, gunfire, drugs, murder, robbery, these are the things that I faced as a young teenager growing up in the Bay Area.

So I was just, when I got to LA, I knew, I was like, I can hustle, man. I'm from Oakland. And I was able to land that record deal. So that was like the first phase, the young artist who wanted everything: the best women, the best cars, the best clothes, the best drugs, the best food, the best, the best, the best, numero uno. But that first phase of life ended one day at the, as I say, peak of my delusion. Peak of excessive narcissism. I was driving down the street, and coming from a party in the Hollywood Hills, and I was struck by a vehicle, and I ended up in a coma for three weeks. And it took away the ability for me to use my right hand to play instruments. So there goes some more resistance right there.

So that was the end of Phase 1 and the beginning of Phase 2, which was resistance. Hey, I can't wipe my own ass. And I'm not joking. I can't feed myself. I can't get up to go pee. So I needed a lot of help. There was a lot of obstacles that were trying to stop me from living that dream that we all have deep, buried inside of us, as you spoke of, the two lives, for a lot of people. But I was very much determined to keep being an artist.

So then I went from being on this major label and having this million dollar advance, deep into the Los Angeles underground, where I rubbed shoulders with Rock en Español, with Afropunk when it was in its really infant stages. And just creating different incarnations, musically, like Blood Sugar, Blood Sugar X, me and this Japanese guy, Chocolate Butterfly, became all these different artists out of survival, out of finding against this pressure and this enemy of doubt, not having the ability to use my right hand. So that struggle, that resistance, gave birth to a very productive 8 years of my life, which was the second phase, which was in the underground. Afropunk, Rock en Español. In south central, running the underground illegal nightclub that opened from noon to 6AM. Best music in LA. And that was incredible.

But that came out of the defeat on the horizon. That came out of the resistance. That came out of the struggle of trying to make something happen when you have, what I call, the claw. I call my right hand the claw. I have probably 30% usage of it. But in the spirit of taking that bullshit, turning it into good shit, standing up to resistance, and using resistance, which is the bullshit, to create something amazing. That was the second phase. And that was a struggle, too, because I just came out of being pampered and babied and getting nice fruit baskets. And you know, I don't get the fruit baskets anymore, man. I didn't get, where are the holiday crackers and cheese? I was from Oakland, man. I didn't know what this was. This was incredible. Man, a guy's going to let me sleep with his wife. Man. What? Where is it? Well that was in Phase 1.

Phase 2 was scrapping in the underground. Keeping it real. Fighting to get your music on a license. Being on Myspace. Setting up tours on Myspace. That was really incredible, and a time of struggle. And so that ended one day, when I thought, you know what? I'm tired of this, waking up every day and it's my birthday. Living in a 3,000 square foot loft and having an after-hours illegal nightclub. I want to do something different. Why don't I move back to my hometown, become a marijuana cultivator? So I thought that's, okay, that's going to be my life. I'm going to get a shop. I'm going to blow out a bunch of commercial buildings. Grow a lot of the best OG Kush, Bubba Kush, Girl Scout Cookies, Northern California, supply some of the

dispensaries on San Pablo. And get a farm going. Grow some veggies. Have some chickens. Have some kids, and walk off into the sunset. Enjoy my life.

And it was very lucrative, and I did that for 5 years. No music. A life of being a farmer. A cannabis cultivator. So all that changed one day because a great thing happened. I had this little boy. I was so happy I had a child. This is what I wanted to do. I was so ambitious. I thought, I'll be a polygamist. I'll have this compound. I failed at being a polygamist, miserably. I didn't even get out of the block. But I had this dream of this artist's life. It was incredible. You should have seen it in my head. If I could have shown it to you, in my head it made so much sense. But in reality, I failed at being a polygamist. So I was successful at being a marijuana cultivator, and I was successful at having a child. I had this baby boy.

And one day I couldn't put him to sleep. It was a beautiful sunny day in Northern California. I was all alone with him. And when he was feeling kind of down or cranky, I could make some daddy faces and they were always funny, and he would laugh. But this particular day, it wasn't working. And I had sold all of my equipment. I didn't have any equipment. HD Pro Tools, two-inch tape machine, guitars, keyboards, I was like, I have nothing to do with music. I've got nothing to say. If I had nothing to say, then I'm not going to fake it. So there was one guitar that was so cheap, such a piece of junk, nobody would give me any money for it, so it lay underneath his little couch for years. Something came over the room. There was a feeling in the room, and I looked at that guitar, and I didn't know what was going to happen was going to change the course of my life and get me into Stage 3.

I picked it up and I played an out of tune G Major. And the room changed. The kid's face went from this disappointing scowl and frown to the biggest smile that I'd ever seen in my life. It was the most committed smile. This expression was committed to joy. A hundred percent of joy. So it freaked me out. I was like, whoa. What just happened there? I got the chills down my spine. I looked around. It was just he and I. There was this smile, there was this appreciation for music. For the strings resonating with this wood, and this sound coming out, and this intent with this claw of a hand that I had. And I thought, man. This must be the language of humanity. I thought before human beings could even muster up a word to each other in communication, there was sound. There was rocks banging. There were grunts and chants by the ancient fires of yesteryear. And I thought, I just learned something. That this is a great way to communicate with people.

Now, I didn't immediately jump back in. It took a couple of years, but it started Phase 3 of a slow walk towards what would be Fantastic Negrito, and cheap, bad-sounding guitars that I would be playing on the street. Because I wasn't really a guitar player. I played more keyboards. I could play a little bit, but it began what we call busking. I thought, I'm going to take the language here and go communicate with people right on the streets. Because this is my salvation. Because I need people. And what was beautiful about this was that there was no middle man this time. There was no club to say, well, yea or nay. I don't know if you can play here for free or not. I don't know if you can play here for free or not. I don't know if you can come and struggle and play here for free, as they do to struggling musicians. Come play for free! And that wasn't there, because I was going right to the people. I was going right to the source.

Well there wasn't a record label to say, well, I think you should look like this, you should sound like this, you should play 12 bar blues. It should sound like this. Package it like this. Blah, blah, blah, blah, boring. No. I was dealing with a loaded, six-string weapon. I was dealing with the people getting off work, on the train. And if I thought I had a good song, well hell, go play it to people who don't want to hear it. You think you got good songs, go play it to people who don't want to hear it. And then, you may see that you're making connections.

So I love the no-middle-man. And this artist was older. He was mature. He didn't want anything like the first phase artist – he wanted everything. The best drug, the best women, the best cars, the best house, the best clothes, the best food, the best, the best, and send me a holiday basket. And if anybody wants to send me a holiday basket now, I'll take it. Because I haven't seen one since I had a million dollar advance. So look up Fantastic Negrito, and send me a holiday basket. And one for Matt Conner, too, because he seems like a nice guy.

So the phase 3 began of life, which has now become Fantastic Negrito, and that's how it worked out for me, these different phases. And along the course, the resistance that helped give birth to each incarnation.

Matt: Sure. Let me ask you this. So much of your story is about resistance in the rearview mirror. You can speak about defeating resistance at these different phases. So for me, my wondering is, like for you today, as this charismatic, another Grammy nomination is in, you've got these, like I love the music. You've got this new audience now. You're set in this new person. You know what phase 3 is. So what does resistance look like for you today? Do you experience it? And at what level?

Fantastic Negrito: Oh my god. Oh my god. Tremendously. And I'm glad that you, that's a very intelligent, and not only is it an intelligent question. It's going to be very useful. Matt, it's going to be very useful to all the people that are out there, struggling as artists. Listen. Even the level that I'm at now, there's resistance. People are like, well, you're contemporary blues, whatever. It's not bluesy enough, your music. It's too soulful. Well, it's soul music, but not really. Like it's not just the way we like it. Like can we get some redundant, already produced, copycat 1960s soul music? Because that makes us feel safe. We like that because it's, you're remaking things and then you're a safe Negro. And that makes us feel real chipper. You make us feel safe. You know, there's that.

And then it's like, well it's rock, but is it really rock? I don't know. Like it's, it's too much soul in that rock. It's too bluesy. It's blues, no it's not. It's crazy. It's that insanity. That thing that makes us like, I'm a liberal, I'm a conservative, I'm this, I'm that. Put me in this basket. I feel safe in this particular category. And so that's my resistance. And it never stops, because in the spirit of, like hey me, I'm like, hey the energy and spirit of punk rock, the discipline of James Brown, baby. You put that together and you got Fantastic Negrito. And I just want to do great music. Man, I just want to have songs like the Beatles. I'm like, you've gotta have songs. I just want to do things that are amazing and compelling. I just want to contribute something to this life that I live. And so when you want to do that, when you want to do some real shit and you want to be real, oh my god the resistance is tremendous.

There's more resistance now than there was when I was just starting on the street. Because then you're being successful so people want you to be something that they can sell easily. They want it to be easy. They don't want you to be, try to pioneer and do different things. And thank god for the Grammys, and thank god for Chris Cornell, and thank god for Sturgill Simpson, and thank god for all the people on NPR Tiny Desk who, they see like, hey artists, wants to be an artist, wants to contribute, wants to think outside of the box, wants to smash categories. Because they're always trying to put us in categories. You're not African American enough. You're not hip hop enough. You're not white enough. Come on, can we get some more whiteness here? You're not Mexican enough. You're not Latino enough. You're not conservative enough. You're not religious enough. You're not gay enough. You're not transgender enough. That's why I wrote Transgender Biscuits. I mean, yeah. We struggle with this in this society.

Your mom or your dad or your uncle, well you're not what I expected. Well, Matt, hey. I expected this. I have some repressed fantasy of how the world to me. And you don't quite live up to that, buddy. And so people can become depressed by that. And people can become sad and disenfranchised. And so what I love, the mission statement of Fantastic Negrito, hey man. Produce what I believe in and nothing else, no matter how great the resistance.

And the resistance is great. It is massive. Because when you get into the building, which I call the building in quotation marks. When you're standing before the council, the imaginary council, you know the people at the gate, they want it straight. They could care less about art. I think a lot of people, they may be in the music business, but it's the business. I'm in the creative, artistic, connection business. And there's a tremendous amount of resistance there. But thank god for you, thank god for NPR Tiny Desk, and you've got to give the Grammys some credit. Because I'm shocked every time I get nominated. I'm like, really? Oh, okay. But there's a chorus of people who don't think I'm blues enough, don't think I'm soul enough, don't think I'm rock enough. Don't think I'm roots enough. Don't think I'm Black enough. Don't think, hey. They're out there. But the thing is, the beauty of artistry, the people that I looked up to, were always pioneers. And I judge my creation based on that. Based on them.

Matt: You were mentioning, thank god for the NPRs. Some of the people who get what it is that you do and sort of help you along. That feels like there is a power of some community around you. Do you feel like you'd be able to feel as confident in your art if there wasn't some sort of chorus that was telling you, hey this fragile intersection that you're occupying, that is where we want you to be. We see what you're doing. Do you think you'd have that level of belief in where you're at without it, and have you felt, really, the fragility of being there without that at times?

Fantastic Negrito: Well, that's a multi-layered question. You've got some good questions, Matt. You must have been doing this for awhile. This is how I feel about that. The first phase artist, yes. He needed that. The second phase artist, second part of my life, needed a little less, but he kind of still craved it. This guy didn't give a fuck. I don't know if I can say that on your podcast.

Matt: You can say whatever you want.

Fantastic Negrito: There's nothing greater, and I encourage every artist out there, when you can reach the not-give-a-fuck stage, you've arrived. You've gotta not give a fuck in that studio. Now

you've got to build the team. The team is important. No team, no dream, no team, no dream. And the people on my record company. The people on my record company trust me. So I think there's some truth to it and there's some not truth to it, because you can't do what I'm doing right now if you give a fuck. It's impossible.

The minute I said I was Fantastic Negrito, there was a chorus of people that said, "Boo." Literally. It happened. They said boo. Literally. I was in a room with some marketing kind of weird intern. Nice people. They're like, it'll never work. Why? Why can't I be Fantastic Negrito and give homage and give praise to Black Roots music? Where I came from? Where the whole world's pop cultures came from? Why can't I say, Skip James and Robert Johnson, Lead Belly and Son House and RL Burnside? That's what Fantastic Negrito is to me.

They're like, well white people don't like saying the word Negrito. It makes them uncomfortable. I thought, wow. The punk rocker in me said, well shit. That's the best reason to be Fantastic Negrito. Because I think that's, we need for people to be a little uncomfortable sometimes. We're missing that. We're getting too comfortable. And we need some resistance, as you so like to eloquently put it.

So it's beautiful. So I'm trying to add to that question that sense that you can't give a fuck. If you do, you're in trouble. When I made *The Last Days of Oakland*, there was a chorus of people, like you can't do that. This is not genre-specific. You can't do that. I never focus on can't. I always focus on can. When I made *Please Don't Be Dead*, I freaked out my own inner circle. They're like, what kind of record are you making here? You just won a Grammy for contemporary blues. What is this Plastic Hamburgers shit? What is this loud riff? What is this loud riff? My god? Oh my god, what is this?

Matt: That is a great track.

Fantastic Negrito: Oh god, my god, you're going to ruin everything that you built, Negrito. See now they call me Negrito. Oh, Negrito. There are very few people who are comfortable with that word. And we didn't give white people enough credit. Hey, can white people get some credit? Hello. Hey, can I knock on, hey, the bank, can we give the white people some credit sometimes? Goddamn. Are we so afraid of them? Are we so discounting them all the time? Are we all so freaked out by this word? You're a racist. Is it a witch hunt? Can we all get a little credit? Just be human beings? A little compassion. Can we talk real with each other? Because when we don't talk real with each other, we get what we have now. And I don't have to get into that. Because we know what we have now. Take a look around. So we gotta talk real with each other.

So I need people. I figured that out. It just came into my head one day. I thought I didn't. I said, I need people. Yes. But I have to not give a fuck. In creating what I do. And then I've got to close my eyes and open them, and whoever's left in that room, yeah I need them. Whoever's not in that room, hey I'm sorry. But I think that's the power in creation. And yeah, I get it all the time, still. Because I'm in this bubble. I'm sure one day it'll burst, and I will give a fuck, and I'll be afraid again. But it's not happening now, and I like the bubble. It's very lonely. I'm alone a lot, and I sit in this room, and I make these records by myself. And it's lonely. But the result is something I'm willing to live and die for. Something I really believe in. And that means

everything in the lifetime of a human being. That we are, no matter what it is, whether it's a smile, a good attitude, a lemonade stand, a company that makes socks. Music, an album, a relationship with someone. It's all worth it.

Matt: Let me ask you one more, because I know, you just actually brought up what I was wanting to ask about, which is, look I grew up in church. The language, when I look at what you're doing, it's almost like the role of prophet. When I'm listening to the new album. It's someone looking at the culture and speaking what is true about the culture, no matter what's going on. And you're talking about, look. I can't care in the studio. I just have to make what's true to me. You brought up being lonely. How do you fight that, in a way? If resistance makes you lonely in this way, and yet you know you have to stand on this ground, are you just grounded enough just to have to deal with it? It feels like an interesting position to me.

Fantastic Negrito: Now, I'm a recovering narcissist. I was a narcissist in that first phase. When you say church, I like to say yeah. My shows, what I do is like church without the religion. So we're plugged into the same thing. I think I have a lot of support around me, and I built a team around me. And I think we all need that. No one can do this alone. Doing it alone is crazy. You're going to get lonely, of course, but in the end, I think that, I have support. And there's people that will put up with a lot of my shit. And I think you have to be willing to make the sacrifices to find those people. And those are the people that are going to tell you your song sucks. And those are the people that are going to tell you, hey man. I just don't believe you. And that's going to piss you off. You've got to have the naysayers, too. And they're just part of the team, and they're part of the support system.

I remember the Tiny Desk, it was a vote. And I voted against it, because we're kind of a collective, and I was like, nah, let's not do Tiny Desk. I'm not really feeling that. I'm just loving the street busking thing.

Matt: Really?

Fantastic Negrito: Yeah. There's people that go against what I'm saying within my circle, in my team. And nothing's perfect, and there's going to be a price for everything. I think in creating this body of work, part of the loneliness is the price. But you know, you just have to shake it off, and you've got to go out there and talk to people and be real with people, too. And that'll help the loneliness, but it's going to come. It's hard. It's hard doing it, man. It's hard. But it's worth it. I think, damn, damn, damn. It's more resistance. That's what resistance is. It's hard. It's lonely. It's terrifying. It's all these things, but that is what makes the product great.

It's like growing plants. I remember, I learned so much growing the marijuana, because there was resistance. And once we fought it, coped with it, harnessed the resistance, made it work for us, incredible buzz. One pound per light. I don't know if you know that. You know that you get your one pound per light with your OG Kush, which was very hard back in the day. Because it's very, there's a lot of resistance. OG Kush doesn't want to do a pound per light. Wants to do less. So there's resistance. So how do you harness that resistance? Take that bullshit, turn it into good shit, as I like to say. That's how you do it. Shit. That's all that there is, man. I'm not that deep, man. I'm like a simple farmer.

Matt: I love it. Hey, Fantastic Negrito, thank you so much for joining us today. For just being so open, and certainly, most of all, for making the kind of important, meaningful music that we're needing in a culture like we're in today.

Fantastic Negrito: Well, I want to thank you so much, because I know that I can't do it without people like you who help support what I'm doing and shine the light on what I'm doing and help amplify what I'm doing. And I want to thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to speak on your podcast.

Matt: You got it.

Fantastic Negrito: Peace.

[theme music]

Matt: You've been listening to The Resistance. If you've enjoyed this episode, please rate us on iTunes and subscribe on your favorite podcast app. And for more information and further episodes, you can find us at listentotheresistance.com. Our theme is composed by Chad Howat. Engineering, production, and additional music by Jay Kirkpatrick. My name is Matt Conner, and I'm your host.

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