

THE RESISTANCE – EPISODE 1.6

Sarah Jaffe interview – Episode Transcript

Sarah: There are no rules. Like, you make what you want to make, and you kind of hope and cross your fingers that people like you, and music fans, will pay attention.

[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.

Sarah Jaffe started the year in 2019 like any of us do: with good intentions, resolutions, laying out the kind of life we want to live. I don't know about you, but I do the same every single year. From my own front porch, I can see a bright neon sign of a 24/7 gym franchise. It's a place that's open and available any minute of any day of any week of the year, and yet ever since I've moved into my house, I've never once darkened the door of that place.

Fortunately, Sarah is a lot better on her follow-through than I am. Sarah's music has always signaled that there's someone intentional on the other side of it all. Whether you've been listening to her a long time, likely due to her acoustic hit, Clementine, or even more recent offerings, like her full-length *Bad Baby*, which is steeped in some killer synth, the lyrics within have always been compelling and honest, authentic and approachable. There's something about her opening up about her own struggles in the life she wants to live that draws you into her music.

In January of this year, Sarah released a stunning new single called *Dark Energy*. "Dark energy," she sings, "stay away from me." It's the latest musical resolution from an artist who has learned, through trial and error, through age and experience, what it means to order her life in meaningful ways. She's learned to nurture positive habits, and to also allow in healthy perspectives. And when it comes to the unhealthy ones, "dark energy, stay away from me."

On this episode of *The Resistance*, Sarah opens up about her struggles to cultivate good habits. She also gets frustrated with her addiction to social media. Just like in her music, she's every bit the approachable artist you think she would be. And when she warns the dark energy to stay away, it's a great reminder that we could also use the exact same stance. Resistance is hard to ward off. We need to be very intentional if we're ever going to make our way through it.

[music]

Matt: Sarah, how are you today?

Sarah: I'm great. Thanks so much for having me.

Matt: As we've been doing with every episode here in season one, the theme of the podcast being *The Resistance* comes from Steven Pressfield's work, *The War of Art*. And Sarah, we've been opening every episode by just reading a couple sentences from Pressfield's work, and I'd love to start our conversation by having you respond to the following, if this is okay with you.

Sarah: Yeah.

Matt: Pressfield uh just says this: "Most of us have two lives: the life we live, and the unlived life within us. And between the two stands resistance." I guess I'm just curious where you're at right now in your

own creative career, and you've been at this for quite awhile, really. I'd love to know kind of where you're at with that topic and that idea of resistance.

Sarah: Interesting to me that this book was written you said how long ago? Two decades ago?

Matt: Yeah. It's been around for about 20 years or so. I, I, I think. I could totally be wrong on that.

Sarah: I think that that's, if that was true then, it's most assuredly true today. Specifically for the reason of social media kind of being this illusion for a lot of people, and also a, kind of a hurdle for me at times. Just because it has this weird applied pressure to make you think that you're not where you should be. And I don't know I guess as far as my thing goes, I always kind of have like, my anxiety is my alarm clock. It's constantly moving, and it's constantly telling me to go. It kind of like doubles as self-preservation. I don't really allow myself the time to sit too much. Although I do love a good wallow. But I don't really sit around too much.

But I think as I get older I realize, I guess I'm just more self-aware. It doesn't necessarily change circumstance of how I feel, but I definitely feel more self-aware of kind of the BS that's involved, and just kind of fight against like the idea of like, there's this expiration date. I think about artists like Cyndi Lauper who had their first, I think "Girls Just Want to Have Fun", I want to say she was 40? When that song came out? And this is after years and years of being told, you're not good enough. You don't look good enough. This, that, this, that.

Another artist that comes to mind is Sia. These are artists that are obviously really admired, but it's also that comfort in knowing, there's really no expiration date. It's really you against yourself. And that's pretty much where I sit. I had someone tell me that people are so used to feeling really hot or really cold, like we as human beings, we don't know how to live in the middle. And that's where we live. We live in the gray. So it's really about finding that ambition in the gray areas to kind of push yourself. And that's what's difficult for me to do, because I like feeling super hot or super cold, like the extremities. You know what I'm saying?

Matt: I do. I do. I mean you speak to that, even with *Between*, from *Bad Baby*.

Sarah: I think no song sums it up more. Yeah, I think that there's such a beautiful thing about being honest about the between. It should be talked about. Most artists are in fact middle-class, working musicians, like, they're the, in my opinion, the bleeding, beating heart of the music industry. And they're out there grinding all the time, and playing shows on four hours of sleep, and selling their own merch. They're hustling. It's a modern-day hustle. You know?

Matt: I want to go back to what you said about social media. Is that a major part of your own resistance because of the comparison culture that that creates?

Sarah: Yeah, it's funny that something that didn't even exist when I started out playing music is now, like, this weird pressure, to make like certain posts and to constantly promote oneself in the same breath that I think that it's absolute BS, I also am highly addicted to it. It's just a weird thing. Like I immediately get nostalgic for like the days when I was basically sending clubs a picture of myself and a burnt CD of demos. And there's no legwork anything. Like I really don't have to leave my house to promote myself. I think I miss the legwork. I think I just miss the hunger a little bit. I'm not as hungry as I used to be.

Matt: This may move us in a different direction in a minute, but I was reading about your preparation for your most recent album, *Bad Baby*, and you were talking about coming up, maybe for the first time, with a set schedule to be creative, like to start writing at 10, to give yourself dedicated time. Do you think that

that sort of approach would be maybe helpful in terms of even social media and, like you said, the addiction there?

Sarah: 1000%. I had never been told until before recording that record. [Producer] John Congleton was actually the one who told me to basically start compartmentalizing my life, because it's not like how it was when I first started out, where, I had this plethora of songs, and there was no preconceived ideas of what it all was or is. It was just bliss. And then it became work. It became my job. And so there was no definitive line in between my everyday life and when I should be working. And he was like, you need to start compartmentalizing your life.

And that's where that came in, basically just saying, here's a start time and here's a hard stop time. And then after that hard stop time, no matter how great a song's going, you stop, and you continue on with your life. And it's weird just even after the first day of doing that, how much it just set into place. You know those, those trite things, it's funny how long you can ignore them until you're desperate for them. And then you realize, oh my god, this is why they're proverbial and trite: because they're true. They work. So I see no reason at all why that wouldn't leak over into everything else.

Matt: You mentioned having that creative schedule, but even stopping in the middle of a song, which I find just to be almost silly. Like I would think if you were feeling quote unquote inspired in the moment, like would you really cut off the process?

Sarah: Yeah.

Matt: Really? So some songs were just left until the next day?

Sarah: Yeah, which was torture, because you fiend for those moments in the creative process where magic is starting to happen and all the pieces are being glued together, it just feels good. I think any artist would tell you that it's the highest of highs, like it's just like, your body's, your brain's most natural high. And so it was just like, oh man, I've got to stop with this tasty delight? So that's still really difficult for me.

It's also really, really difficult for me to get back in those habits. It's amazing to me how like how easy it is to form bad habits, but when it comes to just your overall creative and mental health, it's just like all of a sudden, it's a hurdle. I don't know why it's so difficult for people to do.

Matt: Were you ever afraid that you were going to lose, like will I come back tomorrow and the magic's gone?

Sarah: No, because it's all I thought about. So I would stop, but I would still think about it. I'd run my errands, I'd do what I needed to do, I'd do the laundry, but it was still on my mind. I just wasn't physically in that space.

Matt: Okay. Is that something that you're going to pick back up for this, for this next album? Or is that something that you keep even between albums?

Sarah: Yeah, you know, I've kind of been in this other zone, actually. As soon as the touring for Bad Baby was coming to an end, I just feel like the last couple records, after the creative process is done, I just stopped feeling like myself. Like touring, I think at this moment in my life, I'm not writing it off forever, just kind of started wearing my ass out. Like it just felt like it was the right direction but the wrong lane. So I started uh primarily writing for other artists and wanting to pitch for other artists. So that's what I've

been doing. Which has my head in a totally different space. It's weird how different they are. The mental spaces.

Matt: Yeah, I would think that those would be closely linked. How does one affect the other for you? Like this space of writing for others, does that clear the slate for your own work in some ways, or inform it in any way?

Sarah: Honestly, I think it kind of frees up the pressure of trying to be cool for yourself. Writing for other people, you're obviously, you're writing for other people. And it suddenly becomes just the joy of creating. And I think if it leaked over in any way, it would be in a release of pressure. It's just all the things that I love. It's like melody-based. It's thought-provoking. There's a strange and wonderful formula, and there's a, I guess, a discipline, just like in the infrastructure of writing for other artists, because people will send me tracks that already exist, and so there's just this writing of a pre-existing track, like the collaborative spirit, so there's just already an infrastructure laid in the whole thing of being disciplined. Which I really gravitate to. Like I really, really enjoy it thoroughly.

Matt: I wanted to ask a little bit about *Bad Baby*, although I know that's in the rearview mirror for you at this point. But you know that album is so much about, it feels like an artist finding her confidence or being more assured in herself. Like it's your fourth album. So do you feel like maybe the experience of albums 1, 2, and 3, and working through the feelings and the emotions and the experiences of a younger self, is that just pretty natural for, hey I'm my fourth. I'm older now. I kind of know who I am. I've learned my voice. Is that all, is that a part of that that came out on *Bad Baby*?

Sarah: Oh for sure. One thousand percent. Those moments of confidence, they're certainly captured, as my friend Robert Gomez put it, each record is a polaroid picture. It's a snapshot of where you are. And obviously there are moments where I feel less confident than others, but during this, the writing of this record, I feel like there was just an owning up to it, and I think there's a confidence to owning up to things, and to being honest with yourself, and like I said, self-awareness. And I had never been, up until writing that record, in a creative process, that self-aware. And hopefully the next record cycle, when I'm ready to make my own again, it'll be another moment of a new level of self-awareness.

I can only assume that that just comes, some of that comes with age, and some of it comes with the experience in aging. So it's just like a season. You know, it's just becoming more seasoned and I think so much of that is, on the musical side, is being confident in the band that I play with, and learning from them and also in between records, really doing my best to experiment with other instruments and in writing with and for other artists, you really, it's impossible not to take those things with you in making your own. Like to take a little bit of pop and a little bit of hip hop, and a little bit of electronic, and it's just impossible not to take those things with you and be inspired by them when you're making something.

Matt: By the way, what, what have you been experimenting with lately?

Sarah: I've been playing drums like a madwoman. I love it so much. I'm about as basic of a drummer as one can imagine. But I just like, it puts me in a state, like rhythm section has all the fun. Like, the secret's out. Just so much fun and I love it, like when my drummer friends come in and they, they'll give me a pointer to kind of like break up my patterns, to break up whatever beat that I can't get my head locked out of, like unlocked. There's just so much to learn. And I just feel like it only makes me a better musician.

I basically just want to be able, like next time I'm in the studio, I want to be able to play whatever I'm asking someone else to play. I want to be a good drummer. I want to be a good bass player. I don't want to be the best. I just want to be good at, at all of the things that other people are playing with and for me.

So it's been a really nice way to enjoy music and way to practice music and hear it from an entirely different perspective.

Matt: Yeah, that, makes me wonder whether, some of my favorite artists I think started out as drummers, and I think it gives them a really interesting perspective that they start songwriting from. And I just wonder what that will do to your own music in the future.

Sarah: Well, it's interesting, too, because with Bad Baby it, especially, you know Matt a lot of times would start um kind of building a beat, and then it kind of made me realize that a lot of records, including *Don't Disconnect*, just hearing a beat alone, it just opens up my brain. It opens up a hatch a lot and for melodies and for space. And you just hear things in a different way. So I've really, really been enjoying playing.

Matt: You mentioned opening. I wanted to ask about Synthetic Love, in particular, as a way to start out the album. And we can play a bit of this, as well. But I love, like there's one sustained synth note to open the album for 18 seconds before anything else begins to break in.

[music – Synthetic Love]

Sarah: [laughs] You can't put that song in the middle of a record. Trust me, I tried. And I was like, you know what? There's no, there's no coming back. When you put that song smack dab, it'll just throw everything off. But you can't not put it on the record. It has to be on the record, so why not just like, grab people's attention right out the gate? And cleanse their palate right out the gate. You know what I'm saying?

[music – Synthetic Love]

Matt: I mean I, that's what I wondered about. I bring that up because it feels like, you know, we're talking about resistance, and I feel like starting an album with that is kind of a statement. You know, single culture, where we're like flipping through everything so quickly, here's this arresting sort of almost like drawing a line in the sand, like you're either going to pay attention to this or you're not.

Sarah: Or you won't. That's exactly right.

Matt: Sas there any fear there, putting that on the front end of things?

Sarah: One thousand percent. One thousand percent. Yeah. But I mean, it's something we created, so of course we're going to pay attention to it. But I think we're in a day and age of, of art and hopefully we'll get back to I guess the pure intention, but there are no rules anymore. There is no selling out. There are no rules. Like you make what you want to make, and you kind of hope and cross your fingers that people like you and music fans will pay attention. If I, because there's already the fear that I face within myself of like, the question that I ask all the time, if I weren't me, would I listen to me? And I don't think anyone can answer that question honestly but I just, I can't, if I think, if I start to think about like what other people are going to think while making the record, I'll lose it. Like I'll just lose my footing. It's too scary, you know?

Matt: Have you done that before? Lost your footing?

Sarah: All the damn time. All the time.

Matt: When was the last time?

Sarah: Uh, today? Every day. Every day.

Matt: [laughs] I guess I'm asking in the way in which you just framed it.

Sarah: Yeah, I mean, [sighs] I guess a little bit every day. I mean I have to. If I'm, if I'm on social media, it's near impossible for me not to be like, am I good enough? [laughs] It's almost impossible.

I was reading an interview with Andre 3000 and he said something and I can't remember exactly how he said it, but he was basically like, I don't think that I would be an artist today because of the way things are. Like there's just too much. There's too much. And it's amazing, just in the time that I've been making records and touring, how the record business in general, and the creative process, has just flipped on its head. Like artists have also just had to really morph and mold and transition into this, artists that have been making music for the last 20 years, just, I should say. We've really kind of created our own lane. Because we've had to, you know? Just because of the way people are listening to music, the way that music is packaged, the middle class working musician going on tour is hella expensive. It's all had to change because of this.

Matt: Does that ever have you rethinking things? I mean because it is. It's running a small business now, being an entrepreneur versus just making music.

Sarah: Oh yeah, I've, writing music for, it's everything. It's had me rethink everything. How can I make music a lucrative career for myself and still enjoy it and still not hate myself at the end of the day? Like, touring was really just, I think at the time, it might look different for me in 5 years. Like at the time, it just, I would play a show, and I just didn't feel great. Like, not because of the show, just didn't feel, I don't know. It was just like nudged to the left a little bit. Like it just didn't feel like I was locked in place. It was just kind of, I don't know.

And so I think for me, like, the direction that I would like to go in now is, like I said, writing for other artists, not, you know, it's obviously a very difficult world, but it is lucrative, and it is enjoyable for me, so I'm going to keep going with that until I feel that weird feeling again. Like, eh, I don't know if this is right. You know? But so far like it feels like this is the right direction for the time being.

[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 on 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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Matt: Join us next week when we sit down with Dave Monks, frontman for the band Tokyo Police Club.