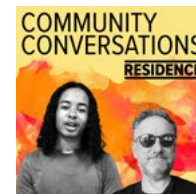


# Community Conversations

## Episode 4: Tony Fisher & Omari Marsalis



**Alison Denholm:** City Arts' Community Conversations podcast explores the diversity of Nottingham's creative community. Series two shines a light on the lives and work of deaf, disabled and neurodivergent artists in Nottingham. Part of City Arts Residence project, it's hosted by Laura Guthrie and Jay Sandhu. The production is supported using public funding by The National Lottery through Arts Council England.

**Laura Guthrie:** Hey, so hello and welcome.

**Omari Marsalis:** Hello, hello,.

**Laura Guthrie:** Hello. So this recording we have Tony Fisher, who is a local poet and photographer. And we also have Omari Marsalis, who is a local artist, and I'll let both of you describe yourselves and your work, in a moment. And myself, Laura, and Jay are here again today. Today I am wearing a black jumper and I have my brown round glasses, and my hair is short and blonde and curly-ish.

**Laura Guthrie:** So, Jay, do you want to describe yourself?

**Jay Sandhu:** Um, hello, my name's Jay Sandhu. As we are zooming in for this. I am sat in my dressing gown, um, because, uh, I didn't realise we were doing the audio description. So yeah, you're getting me in my dressing gown today.

**Laura Guthrie:** Great. Thank you Jay. And let's go to Tony. Would you like to describe yourself today?

**Tony Fisher:** Yeah, yeah. I'm sitting in my living room. My cat's on the settee. That's sweet. I'm wearing a, uh, thick wool jumper with autumny leaves and colors on it, and I'm wearing one of my many pairs of pink spectacles and have short hair.

**Laura Guthrie:** Omari. Would you like to describe yourself today,

**Omari Marsalis:** Hello, my name is um, Omari, and I'm wearing a Beanie Hat today. I have long hair. My hair is a mess today. That's why I'm wearing a

Beanie Hat .

**Laura Guthrie:** Oh, thank you Omari. So let's find out a little bit more about you both and your practice, your art practice. I think that would be a really great place to start. Tony, let's start with you. Can you tell us what kind of work you do? What kind of work do you create?

**Tony Fisher:** Okay, right. Well, it's all through the years basically. I'm a photographer, but I also worked with film quite a lot as well. It's experimental film, documentary film, photography, short stories and poetry, and also a bit of painting as well, but in the core things, photography. But you can see, that covers a multitude of sins. It's evolved throughout the years. The thing is, no matter how old you are, no matter how young you are, you never stop learning.

**Tony Fisher:** I'm learning new things. I've worked a lot at the moment to start to work a lot with Polaroid and also sound. So, you know, there's still lots more to learn and do, you just don't stop learning.

**Laura Guthrie:** Yeah, I agree with that. Definitely. And I think that's part of the joy of being an artist, that openness to taking joy in moving from one thing to another, those kind of tangents where you learn how to do something or you learn something from a piece of work you've done and then that takes you to what you do next and how you might approach your next project or your next idea

**Tony Fisher:** Just to add on to that, something that, particularly the last few years, I've actually, I want to push the envelope and I've also wanted to get, I've got involved with theatre as well. And with New Perspectives, in Nottingham, a couple of times actually helping out on research of script development as well as photography.

**Tony Fisher:** And I've even done a bit of acting, with them, you know. I want to do different things as well that might use photography, or it might not use photography. That's really important that you engage. Well, for me anyway, that I don't just do one thing, because you become stale, if you make mistakes, it doesn't matter. I mean, you know, as long as you, keep thinking.

**Jay Sandhu:** Yeah. I always find it really interesting that some people like to put artists in boxes. When I've told people that I've gone from doing comedy, and now I'm starting to do bits of music, they're like, but you do comedy or you do this. Why are you doing this? Why are you starting to get into photography, Drew? Why are you trying to get into art, art spaces. You just like, well, I'm just

telling stories. I'm just choosing a different way to tell this story.

**Tony Fisher:** I used to tell people, I'm an artist and they'd say, can you come and paint me horse? You know, not really. So the other thing is, before I shut up, but I'm just gonna say as well, what I've done over the last sort of 10 years really. And I love it, is collaborating with another artist as well.

**Tony Fisher:** So not just working on your own. I've worked with several artists doing joint works. I'll always join a project with another artist or artists. So I like actually collaborating with all the people as well. Yeah, not just on me own.

**Laura Guthrie:** Yeah. And that's often where some really cool ideas come from, isn't it? Omari, how about you tell us a bit about the work you do and, and you as an artist, what does that mean?

**Omari Marsalis:** To me, so I started off writing, when I was 15. I was always good at writing stories in English class, English lessons. I didn't get it, well, I've got it now. I've got the GCSE now, but I didn't get it at the time. But I was good at the coursework. Coursework involved more creative writing.

**Omari Marsalis:** So through that, it kinda just stemmed off into me starting to go into poetry, to starting to rhyme things, and go into poetry, first of all. But then always being around music with my dad, cuz he's a producer and I grew up in a studio. It just happened naturally for me to start making music when I was like 16 probably.

**Omari Marsalis:** Yeah. Stem from, stem from there. But a lot of my stuff involves, like, some of my favorite songs are my ones where I'm telling this story. I'd say that. Yeah. Yeah, I'd say that

**Laura Guthrie:** The songs that you write are about your favorite ones, the ones that are telling stories.

**Omari Marsalis:** Yes.

**Laura Guthrie:** What, what kind of stories do you tell? What would be the kind of feel to the stories you tell? Or, or is it very eclectic?

**Omari Marsalis:** I think it can be a bit of both, because what I'd say, what helps me write a lot is being around different people, and, it may not necessarily be my life, but just being around it or being just around the areas where stuff is happening, or having friends that have gone through certain situations.

**Omari Marsalis:** It tends to naturally come to me where I'll just write a line down, then I may look at that line and say, oh, I can create something out of this. So I can make one story. I've got a song called Four Seasons. I feel like I'm doing a plug, [laughs]. Called Four Seasons, that'll be coming out soon. Um, and that's a story about different women that I know.

**Omari Marsalis:** So yeah, it's a, it's an interesting perspective on that. And I think my main thing with telling stories is, giving the side where something's happening, but also putting my twist on it, my perspective, like summing it up.

**Jay Sandhu:** Yeah, I was thinking when you do those songs that are, that are telling a story, I find the audience get so captivated in it because you're taking them on the journey.

**Jay Sandhu:** I've been in places where everyone's jumping about to one song you've done, and then next minute everyone's still. Everyone's eyes are just on and they're just listening, and they're so involved in what's going on. And I think, like you said, when you're telling stories, it connects with people, doesn't it?

**Omari Marsalis:** Yeah.

**Laura Guthrie:** Interesting. Yeah, I think what's very telling is that both of you talked about the way that you perceive things and how that informs the art that you make, and also the collaboration between you and other people, that other people are part of that process. It's not necessarily just you, it's your work, but it's the thoughts and feelings and the connections you make with other people that can also inform the work that you do. Really interesting.

**Laura Guthrie:** So one of the reasons we're doing this podcast is because we wanted to broaden the kind of, uh, people's perceptions of the work of disabled artists in, in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire.

**Laura Guthrie:** So Tony could, would you mind if we start with you? Just, if you could just tell us about what it was like starting out as an artist, as a disabled artist at the start of your career, what kind of barriers did you face then?

**Tony Fisher:** I started off, and you say wasn't born in 1990, but I, I started off more or less, round about 1973, so that's shut you all up, you know, and I suppose in a way, uh, wanna start, I had no conception of mental health or disability or nothing like that.

**Tony Fisher:** I started off doing painting, and, and things, and I went to art

college foundation, did a bit of filmmaking and sculpture and god knows what, and then did a degree at Trent, Trent University, Poly as it was then, in photography and film, but gradually coming out into the real world, then I discovered all about kind of disabilities and things, but it was a very gradual process.

**Tony Fisher:** It wasn't something that affected me directly, but indirectly. It wasn't until probably the late eighties when, you know, in fact, when I engaged with Shape, I can't remember how that came about, but then it came very aware. Things like hidden disabilities and things like that. And so I did one or two projects with people, and in-particular, as a photographer, I'd always been interested in hidden disability, things you can't see, cause everyone thinks a disability is someone in a wheelchair, you know? Well, there's a lot more to it than that.

**Laura Guthrie:** Tony, can I just ask you, when you first met other disabled artists through East Midland Shape, what difference did that make for you? Or did it not make...

**Tony Fisher:** It made a big difference. Cause I had no preconceptions at all. And, and actually, uh, I, I had to work around things and, you know, talk to people and then find out, you know, I didn't know. You know, so it is a learning, it's a learning curve. It always has to be a learning curve. And, so immensely important.

**Tony Fisher:** And I think of the computers when we started. There's no digital. We couldn't have done Zoom then. You know, there wasn't any, any mobile phones, there was no internet.

**Jay Sandhu:** Tony, with that kind of lack of access to knowledge, did you ever find, and not from like your point of view, from other people's point of view, so I think one thing the internet has done is it is made it easier, like social media, even things like TikTok have helped people understand more about certain disabilities or neuro divergencies, because it's been broken down instead of in a scholarly article into a 30 secs video.

**Jay Sandhu:** Did you find people were shocked or did you find people were always trying to guess what your disability was? Were they quite abrupt with it? Were they nice with it? How did you find that aspect being a disabled artist?

**Tony Fisher:** It's interesting you should say that actually, because they, they, really did vary. There was lots of different attitudes around. It sounds like a game show. Guess the Disability, don't it? You know, it would've been a game

show. Yeah, there were, there were different attitudes around. I mean, I spent a lot of time in the early and the late eighties, and early nineties actually looking after young children, my children, because the wife worked full-time, and, and I had to fit in the work around. So you can't separate it totally. Like, disabled here and then able there, because it sort of merges and there's all kinds of gray areas.

**Jay Sandhu:** But I was gonna say, so Omari, how is that different for you, as obviously you've, you've gone through this process in the late 2010's, early 2020's. So, I'm guessing you've only ever had this experience from being within the digital world and not actually had these experiences, as Tony was saying, from a more face-to-face point of view.

**Omari Marsalis:** Yeah, I'd say more digital. But a bit of both as well. Cause I kind of, I think when I was born, it kind of, when technology really was starting to... it was like I grew up with it in a sense, but I also had that side with that as well for a little bit.

**Omari Marsalis:** It's like you said, there is a bit of good and a bit of bad. Or the technology aspect for like, especially mental health wise, it makes comparisons a lot more, and it's like, where as before celebrity-ism, you wouldn't see them. Well now it's like you see what they're doing and it's weird. It's like everyone's in this little bubble

**Omari Marsalis:** Yeah. It makes it a struggle to adjust and people will just be posting the good parts as well. So you are thinking your life's not great, so it can be difficult in that sense. Yeah, definitely.

**Laura Guthrie:** If you wanted to reach out to or find out more about other disabled artists' work, or how to kind of overcome certain barriers that you are facing, would you reach out to the digital platforms for that or would you still, do you still have networks, kind of physical networks for that?

**Omari Marsalis:** I think sometimes the digital platforms are used to promote. So someone may promote a networking thing, then I'd go to that. So like, I'd say I'd use social media mostly. I'll see something what's happening, but still make sure I go in person. Yeah, I do definitely believe in keeping that balance. I feel like it keeps you just mentally in a better space as well, doing that.

**Jay Sandhu:** How difficult and how draining do you find those, some of those human interactions? Cause I know sometimes they can be really draining when you finish them. And you don't wanna speak to anyone, you don't want to do anything for a while. How do you guys deal and cope with that?

**Omari Marsalis:** Yeah, it's like the social battery goes down quite a lot. I've learned to just let people know, like when I'm having my time I have my time, then I'll get back to you because I feel like it's important and it's fair on them, and fair on you. Cause otherwise I'm not really giving, I'm not present in the moment. So yeah, I do just let them know. Then take my time out and recoup, recharge, then get back.

**Jay Sandhu:** And do people generally kind of respond well to that?

**Omari Marsalis:** Um, it used to be a thing where some people may not, but I stopped caring about it

**Jay Sandhu:** Fair enough.

**Omari Marsalis:** Because they're not people that kind of get it. So yeah, I'm just like, yeah...

**Tony Fisher:** You've made a very good point there. You need to take time out for yourself to recharge your batteries. For example, now, lockdown, I've done a lot of work in lockdown. Just going out, walks every day in the countryside and rediscovering even on my own doorstep, really, changed my viewpoint on a lot of things and, and I still do it. Went on a beautiful walk yesterday looking at different shapes of leaves and smelling the air and everything like that.

**Tony Fisher:** It makes you feel so much better doing something like that, than trying to think what you're going to do, and sitting in the room watching tv, you know, and it, it is so much good for you to do something in the fresh air, for me anyway, and it recharges my batteries that way, you know.

**Jay Sandhu:** Yeah. Do you find being... have any extra barriers being a person of colour and being neuro divergent, or do you think there's not, you don't really have a difference in terms of barriers that you're face with the two

**Omari Marsalis:** Yeah. I'd say for sure. Yeah, definitely. And sometimes it's like, it's always stuff that's hard to explain. There's a word called Afro Surrealism. Yeah. Just slight things in certain moments that may not be seen by others, but you'll know yourself.

**Jay Sandhu:** Could you, could you just explain that for the audience, for the people that are listening, what's meant by that? People that don't know what it is?

**Omari Marsalis:** Oh, trying to think of, like, a little example. Okay. You know, like underlying racism.

**Jay Sandhu:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Omari Marsalis:** Or even just like assumptions of...

**Jay Sandhu:** As unconscious stuff. Yeah

**Omari Marsalis:** Yes, yes, yes. Like, I don't know, one would be, maybe, this happened, actually. I ain't gonna mention any names, but, where it's like, oh, I can go for a smoke break.

**Omari Marsalis:** It's like, I don't smoke. Then it's like, oh, but I bet you smoke though. Whereas even that, it's like, where are you getting that from? Why are you assuming that for? It's little things like that. Yeah. Yeah.

**Jay Sandhu:** It's like those little cultural bits that people weirdly pick out, isn't it?

**Omari Marsalis:** Yeah.

**Laura Guthrie:** Can I ask how much of those experiences impact on the work that you do as an artist, Amari.

**Omari Marsalis:** Oh yeah, definitely. Yeah. It comes out a lot. There's that thing of controlling your rage or a certain feeling or angle, which what I love about art is because you can channel it through it. Yeah. Emotions.

**Laura Guthrie:** Do you think that that has an impact on your audiences? So we were talking before about representation, weren't we? But it's not just about you being seen as an artist of colour and a disabled artist, but also that the work that you do represents those experiences. Do you think, is that part the reason why you do it or is it a byproduct of what you do? Yeah. What do you see as the impact of your work when it does represent your lived experiences in that way?

**Omari Marsalis:** I'd say like, so my, like ever since I started creating, it's always been because it's my way of communicating in a sense. It's my best way of communicating. So I've never seen it as doing it because I kind of wanna make people feel a certain way. It's been more to get stuff out. I mean, me, where it's happened to be that people see it as a certain way and create a conversation.



**Omari Marsalis:** But yeah, it's, it's, it's interesting that it's worked like that because the aim, there wasn't necessarily the aim of doing that. Well, I guess it's, it's made me think differently about it now, so I will talk about different things just because I know people take it in more through music rather than me talking as well.

**Laura Guthrie:** And I'm, I suppose I'm interested to know what we feel as disabled artists, what the future holds, you know, particularly for younger artists, well, for all disabled artists really, but what do the next 10 years look like?

**Omari Marsalis:** I reckon it'll be more open, to be honest, I feel like people are slowly opening up a lot more, and even just things like this, it's just adding that encouragement for the youth of the future, I believe, and having them, maybe having them conversations with them quite early so they're aware of it at least, and it's like in their subconscious.

**Laura Guthrie:** What do you think, Jay, as a representative of the younger generation here?

**Jay Sandhu:** I'm just on the border! I think it's, it's been really interesting in this conversation listening to both Tony and Omari, I think. What's been really interesting for me is how many similarities there still are. Even though, what did you say Tony, seventies, eighties to 2020's. That's a long time. Like that's a long time. And when you think of how far we've advanced with technology or culture or anything like that, how far that's advanced, but then there's still things that Tony said you experienced when you were young and Omari said you've experienced when you was young, and I think, there's 30, 40 years apart, isn't that, and it's still not really changed, but I think it's nice that we're heading in the right direction, cause I think the younger generations, like you were saying, Omari, the younger you're telling people and the more you are speaking to people about it, they are learning more. It's, even if you think of slurs for example, that people used to be acceptable back in the day, you would, you don't hear kids saying some of the things now, and it's gonna be progressive, but it's gonna carry on happening, but I think we're heading in the right direction. Fortunately.

**Laura Guthrie:** This is a slight tangent, so apologies. Omari, Tony, have you ever created your own Access Rider?

**Tony Fisher:** No, what's that

**Jay Sandhu:** I've only just heard about that literally, about three weeks ago.

I heard about that and I was like, oh, okay. Yeah. Explain, explain what it is, Laura.

**Laura Guthrie:** Yeah, so it is, because I work in theatre and, and obviously riders is something that, and also Omari, you'll know about those in terms of sort of musicians and so on, but I'm thinking this is one way where I think things will get better because access riders are becoming much more common and more people are aware of them. So it's exactly the same premise as a rider. It's something that you need in place to make it possible to do your best work, basically.

**Laura Guthrie:** So if you are going to be working with somebody in whatever capacity, in my field it's, it's usually a creative that's going into a theatre to do some rehearsals and then put on, you know, have a production made and as a disabled person, you create an access rider, which basically, there are lots of different templates and you can choose your own.

**Laura Guthrie:** It's not like one set way of doing it. But it basically outlines in the social model format what you need in place in order for you to do your best work. So that can be anything from 'I need to be able to take a break after so many hours of work' or 'I need to not start work before a certain time if I've finished late the night before'.

**Laura Guthrie:** Right to, it's helpful for me to have a chair with arms in the space that I'm working in. It might be that if you're somebody that takes medication, you want to be able to have time slots available for you to do that in private or you would like to have water available.

**Tony Fisher:** Where will I get this from, it is a form you have to fill in or something

**Laura Guthrie:** No, it's, no, not at all.

**Laura Guthrie:** It, it, you can write it entirely yourself. There are templates online, London Shape have got a template. Unlimited have got a template. If you just Google Access Rider template, you'll get quite a few. Some of them, uh, some of them infer that you need to give people quite a lot of medical information, but you don't have to do that.

**Laura Guthrie:** You don't have to give people your medical diagnosis. You just need to tell them what it is that makes it possible for you to do your best work. Which might be only blue Smarties in a bowl

**Jay Sandhu:** But yeah, it's how it got described to me was how can the venue or the promoter or, cause I got, I got told this, I was talking to Trekkah about this Omari, um, he was like talking.

**Jay Sandhu:** How can the artist, how can the promoter, can the host, how can the venue make your performance as easy as you can so that you can perform to the best of your ability without being stressed out? And it might be just like, as you said something as simple as, after my, after I perform, I wanna have a room where I can sit in and not be disturbed for 20 minutes.

**Jay Sandhu:** I dunno why I've only just heard about it and why it's only a thing. Because I also think not even for neuro, not just for neurodivergent and disabled people, just for people in general that perform or do anything, it's useful to have that. I know as a promoter, myself, and a host, if I know someone says to me, oh, Jay, after I perform, I just kinda need a massive glass of water and a pack of crisp, I'll be like, well, yeah, I can sort that out for you if I know that beforehand.

**Jay Sandhu:** That nicely concludes our episode today, so I'd like to say thank you to Tony for joining us and sharing all of your wisdom. And same to you Omari. Thank you very much for sharing your wisdom and both of you, your insights on the questions we were talking about.

**Jay Sandhu:** I honestly, again, feel like we could have spoken for another two hours, but maybe we'll get to do a round two at some point.

**Tony Fisher:** Alright. It's better than the Archers, this is, yeah.

**Laura Guthrie:** I just, it's been such an absolute joy to meet Omari, for the first time, as I've not met you before. And as ever, a real joy to talk to you again, Tony, and just to hear those different reflections from different generations of disabled artists. I think it's really, yeah, it's given me lots to go away and think about. So thank you and I can't wait to come and see you perform Omari.