

## ***Yes, and Cafe***

### **Episode 2**

**Guests: Steve Haines and Taylor Monk-Watkins**

Nadja Cech: Welcome to the *Yes, and Cafe*, a podcast where we explore, learn, and create with ordinary people who do extraordinary things.

Omar Ali: 'Yes, and' is the powerful, intentional, and creative practice of building with other people. The name comes from improvisational theater. So, what is it? One, paying attention. Two, affirming. And three, building on what others give you. That's it! Yes, and.

Nadja: I'm Nadja.

Omar: And I'm Omar. and we're broadcasting from the University of North Carolina Greensboro

Nadja: On today's show we have Steve Haines. Steve has been a professor of jazz in the UNC Greensboro School of Music for 20 years. He was instrumental in building the Miles Davis Jazz Studies Program here, and has earned a great international reputation. Steve is an accomplished double bassist, performer, teacher, and community organizer. He's released several albums, including most recently his songwriting debut, *Steve Haines and the Third Floor Orchestra*, which came out this past March and was described as "A masterpiece!" by Japan's preeminent Jazz magazine. Steve's a native of Canada, a skilled amateur hockey player, a dad and a lover of music, obviously, and butterflies. Steve, welcome to the program.

Steve: I'm very glad to be here. This is very nice.

Omar: We're interested in how becoming adept at improvisation can help us in many aspects of our lives. Clearly, jazz musicians are experts at improvisation. So what does it take to be a good improviser? What advice do you have on learning to become a better improviser?

Steve: I guess the first thing is that I think the word "improvisation" can be really intimidating to people, and I think we have to realize that we're improvising all the time. I mean, people are improvising all the time; we have our words and we've got our, like, way of talking with punctuation and we have, like, rules about how we speak, but nothing that we say is scripted in the morning for the whole day. We, you know, we have to make these decisions.

Nadja: That's a really good point!

Steve: Are we gonna say three words, or are we gonna say twenty, or... You know, we have all these decisions of whether we're silent, we listen, or whether we step in, so we're constantly improvising. So we're all improvisors. So that's the first thing. I think there's really nothing to be afraid of when it comes to improvising. The second thing to be a good improviser--there's sort of a simple thing which is, you know, it's important to be really good at whatever our craft is. You know, when I'm talking to jazz musicians, for example, call I am often using this analogy of, "Listen, I know that what you have inside of you is very creative, but the problem is if you talk to me and tell me, for example, let's suppose you have the cure to cancer and you want to tell me but there's all this peanut butter in your mouth [makes smacking, gibberish sounds] and I'm

never going to hear what your solution is. So it's important not to have peanut butter in our mouth. So for us, that means means learning the syntax with respect to jazz, being a jazz musician, we have to know how to play our instruments beautifully. I guess that would mean for somebody who's a writer--I think it was Hawthorne that said, you know, if you want to learn how to write a poem read a thousand poems, you know, just to be really, really immersed in the culture. And the biggest one is observing. For jazz musicians, our observation is with our ears--we listen. And what do we listen to? We listen to our precedent. Just like an attorney learns case law in order to pass the bar, in order to go before a judge. They have to learn precedent. So do we--we have to learn about our history, we have to learn about the history of our music, the roots of our music, where it comes from, and the musicians that played. And we do that almost in a literal way with imitation, you know, like my little girl Violet for example, she's learning how to speak not from a textbook, you know, she learns from listening and just imitating, and that's why the things that I say around the house are so important, 'cause she could repeat it! [Laughing] So, yeah so what we do in jazz music is we actually will listen to a Louis Armstrong solo and then be able to sing it exactly the way he played it, and then what we'll do is we'll play that solo back on our own instruments, and we'll do that, you know, every week or every other week. A student will bring in a solo and they'll have learned the syntax of punctuation and everything that the person used, and the really interesting thing about that is that based on all of our observations in our listening skills, and pulling, and taking, and imitating we eventually learn how to speak on our own and then it ends up to sort of informing us with who we choose to become. Because I think that's a choice, we say, "Well, I want a little bit of Ray Brown, this bass player, in me, and I want a little bit of Charlie Hayden, and I really, really want some Billie Holiday in me, and how could I not have some Ella Fitzgerald in my life as a bass player. So all of those things, all of the influences I sort of pull, and it just makes me who I am. Does that make any sense?

Nadja: Absolutely. I really, Steve, I love how you were talking about that we all improvise every day, because I both think it's so great to have you on here as an expert improviser but I think it's also really important that you're making the case that we don't have to be experts to be able to improvise, that we're all doing this and there's that sort of divide that we see between, you know, "You're the expert and I don't know what I'm doing and so how could I possibly think about doing this," and I like the idea of breaking that down.

Steve: One other thing that's really fascinating on the bandstand is, because everything is in the moment, it's important when we have a jazz band that's performing--there's nothing written down and we're all improvising--so it's very important that the person who has the time to speak--the soloist or the person playing the melody, for example--that the rest of the band is listening to that person and affirming and supporting what they are. So that means that if a saxophone player is playing something pensive, then the rhythm section, we become pensive and if the person becomes screaming from the rooftops joyful, then we support that and we make them feel very, very comfortable, and so it's very important that we're supportive. And the interesting thing about that is there can be a disagreement, you know, there could be a saxophone player who maybe they play something sad or something, and then the drummer may just follow them, they may not agree, but the drummer will follow, always they should follow. And that is, I think, a really important thing so then maybe at the break there could be a conversation. "You know, I really thought I was hearing it going this way" and "Oh, I was doing it

this way.” No matter what happens, when we’re on the bandstand we follow one another. So we support one another no matter what and that’s very important.

Omar: That’s interesting. I was just thinking about, like literally right before we were recording this, we were talking about the microphone and we were talking about how positioning ourselves, and Nadja was reading and then she would look up to me because she was actually trying to make eye contact--’cause that’s how she is, she wants to make connection with people. And I was really concerned about the microphone and so in the moment, I was like, “Nadja!”

Nadja: “Stop looking at me!” [Laughing]

Omar: But I just remember, like, and I was thinking, what would it have meant for me to have just let her just do that and not worry about it? I mean as our technician said--

Nadja: “Nadja’s really loud anyways, so it’ll be fine!” [Laughing]

Omar: Right! [Laughing] But I love that that’s part of the jazz culture, right? That that’s kind of what you do.

Nadja: Well, and that sort of segues perfectly into something else I wanted to ask you about, Steve, which is this idea of how we support each other on stage. Surely that transitions somehow into how you interact or how your students interact with others in their everyday lives. So are there ways in which, when you’re living your life, or maybe you get feedback from your students about how they’re living their lives, that this activity of listening and supporting each other on stage actually translates into something about the way you interact?

Steve: Right, I think so, I really do. I think, just for example, with being in the bandstand and having, like, maybe the drummer wants to zig and the saxophone player wants to zag, and so there is sort of usually a pecking order--whoever is playing the melody at the time, or a solo, which is the new melody--that particular person is followed and so the drummer then instead of zagging will zig, right. What it ends up doing is, it creates honest conversation, which later on can end up really benefiting--I think a lot of times we’re afraid to listen to each other. We’re afraid to actually listen to what someone else has to say and the problem with the no communication thing is we’re never gonna learn from each other. And so for me, the beauty of getting together--I mean, let’s take an orchestra for example. You get an orchestra and that conceivably would have people from many different religions, you know, and different political parties, or whatever, but it all sounds like beautiful music. Everybody’s coming together to play beautiful music. So for me, I think the importance of really earnestly trying to understand where someone else is coming from is not only beneficial to the person trying to learn from the other person, but I think it’s also beneficial because it builds a bridge and someone then feels like, “Gosh, you know, I’m being listened to,” you know, like, “This Democrat is listening to me and this is so nice for them to actually listen to me instead of just assume that I’m evil.” But, you know, I was thinking about how in this day and age, everything has become so polarized that we’ve just, immediately we make these assumptions about each other, and the truth is, like, if I’m on the side of the road and it’s pouring rain outside and I’ve been there for a few hours in the middle of nowhere, it doesn’t matter if it’s, like, a Ford Bronco, or a pickup truck that comes up,

or whether it's, like, a Prius that comes to get me. I'm just very glad to see someone. So I feel like we're actually closer than I think we think we are.

[Music Break]

Omar: So, Steve, I know that you have pretty major and relatively recent responsibility as a parent. You have a four-year-old and two-year-old twins. Can you comment--as a fellow dad, I'm asking this-- on how being a dad has changed your life and how you manage your--you know, the multiple roles you have as a parent, as a professor, as a community organizer, among other things?

Steve: Right, I'm late to having children, you know, I'm 48 years old and I have a four-year-old, like you said, and the two-year-old twins, so I'm late to it. Um, the first thing is that I think I've lived my whole life listening to some of my best friends talk about how quickly children grow up and how it just disappears before their eyes. So for me, the way that's informed me is I try to just enjoy every second when I'm with them--and just to take a step back, our house is a train wreck right now.

Nadja: [Laughing] I can vouch that. We've been over hanging out with the twins so they can tear things apart pretty quickly.

Steve: I am lucky to be the husband of Dr. Kimberly Peterson. She's a chemist here at UNCG. And so, we both sometimes--we get overwhelmed, and luckily it doesn't usually happen at the same time, and I think that's normal. But honestly there's one thing that I sort of realized a long time ago and that is that I'm never going to be able to get done in a day that I wish to get done. That is hopeless. There is no way I'm going to get everything done that I need to get done. I think the trick is to enjoy the process and to allow myself to fail. Allow myself, because it's really not about all that stuff. Like, my list--if I have a list that I need, things I need to do--it'll be there tomorrow. And so I sort of feel like the process of being in the very center of our moment right now is the most important thing. It might sound a little flaky, but I have this thought, you know, it's like, what makes our Earth unique from the rest of the universe, at least as we know it now, is that we have awareness of what we are and who we are. We have life, and as humans we have this ability to realize that we're alive. You know, like, we have this awareness, this consciousness, and if you think about the rest of the universe and then this tiny little blue little marble, it's actually just absolutely spectacularly special what we have. And if I go around sort of spinning my wheels and thinking about everything that I'm not getting done, or stressed out about something, I sort of feel like I'm missing life. I feel like if I go through my whole life constantly worried, or worried about the future, or thinking about the past, that I'm actually just not enjoying the very moment and then I'll look back on my life and I've never really actually been aware of the moment that I'm in. So for me, I think right now, I'm enjoying my presence with the three of you, and when I get home and I see my children, I'll light up and I'll be with them. And I won't be able to spend enough time with them tonight and then they'll be tired and go to bed, and then I'll only have a few hours to do something before I get tired and I have to fall asleep. There's this old friend of mine who used to say, "Now that I've lost all hope I feel much better."

Omar and Nadja: [Laughing]

Steve: And you know, taken out of context, that's terrible, of course. But in this context that I'm talking about, I think there's tremendous freedom in letting go, and living, and being--just enjoying our lives.

Nadja: Steve, that really resonates with me, also as a parent, and I was thinking about how, I think the biggest challenge is those transitions between the different spaces and being able to enjoy the space you're in without carrying too much from the last one you were in. And, yeah, we're all figuring that out, but I love your comments about remembering that we're on the little blue marble. So, changing the topic just a little bit, Steve has been leading this new university theme, which is "She Can, We Can" at UNC Greensboro. Actually, Omar and I are both on the collaborations committee for this as well, so we've been involved in the conversations, and Steve, I just thought maybe you could speak a little bit to what the "She Can, We Can" theme means to you, where this comes from, what we're trying to accomplish?

Steve: Yes, I'm really excited to be talking about it. So it's for 2021, it's called "She Can, We Can." The byline is "Beyond the Women's Suffrage Centennial." The idea is--and I think it's especially important because our history is as a women's college and we have this big suffrage anniversary coming up--I think it's important to sort of use the hundredth year period to sort of step back and say, "Okay, so there are these incredible sort of heroes in our history that battled for equality a century ago and beyond, even further back than that, and so where are we now in--we'll be in 2020--and so we obviously we have great discrepancy in a number of different ways with equality, so I'm really looking forward to having really honest conversations about those things, gender equity specifically. There's a number of disciplines across campus that are going to be doing a whole bunch of different things. We'll have exhibits and arts and we'll have new classes created, and be able to have really, hopefully, healthy conversations about it. I mean, just personally, myself, when we started looking into this theme--if you had asked me, like, "How much male privilege do you think you have?"

Nadja: [Laughing] On a scale of one to ten.

Steve: Yeah, I think I would have probably said, "Yeah, I imagine that things are easier for me than for women." Just in the short half-a-year that I've been studying this, I everyday realize more and more how completely different it is. There's that saying you know, "We don't know what we don't know." We just don't know what it's like to be the other person; it's hard, so we can talk about all sorts of things, but even beyond women's equity, we can talk about equity, like racial equity, we can talk about responsibility, and we can talk about, gosh, so many different things. And then of course, to be specific about the suffrage movement--and this is another that I'm just reading a lot about--the suffrage movement itself was so much more than just the vote. [It] had to do with our health, women's bodies and ownership of a woman's body's property, parental rights, you know, so many different things. And actually the history of everything leading up to 1920 and the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment was--some of the things that happened were sort of, were basically, they were appalling. Well, there were a lot of things, but to speak frankly, it seems to me that the Black woman's vote got sort of thrown under the bus there in the Senate, when it went from the house over to the Senate. I think what would be very important for us to do is just to talk, have, like, truthful conversations about what happened so that we're just, we're all on the same page about this, because I think a lot of our history books don't talk about these kinds of things.

Nadja: Thank you.

Omar: I was thinking about something you said earlier about--I guess the way I think about it, being intentional--and I was thinking, I was connecting it to privilege, and I was thinking that you don't know. People don't know what they don't know, but I think that part of what is also the case is that people are making intentional choices not to be supportive of each other. And it takes a particular gendered form in our society, which I think, I'm really glad that you're heading this up, 'cause you're such a masterful organizer of stuff.

Steve: Thank you.

Omar: Yeah. But I think that part of what I think about is, the intentionality, the agency that we have to create our lives, and so, people make choices. They make choices to use their privilege, and we can use our privilege to support ourselves, or we can use it to support others, and I always think about, like, how in any situation if you're not the category of persons that's sort of marginalized, you can always help by affirming them. So in some ways this whole thing of "Yes, and" is a way of empowering people. And it's interesting, 'cause there is a literature now that empowerment is a "giving of power to the people below." I still see it as a positive thing, that it's creating something to go--

Nadja: It's sharing. And creating more.

Omar: Creating more. Exactly.

Nadja: Yeah, it's not like it's a limited resource, like we don't have to think about it as a zero-sum game. We can actually create more power, period.

Omar: That's right. That's right. So, Steve, you mentioned that there is--"the three of us here." The third person, other than yourself, there's four of us in the room, is Taylor Monk-Watkins. She's been listening in, and Taylor is a student in Lloyd International Honors College here at UNC Greensboro. She's majoring in Biology and Religious Studies with minors in Chemistry and Islamic Studies. It's cool, right? She was born in Pittsburgh, but she mostly grew up in Clayton, North Carolina. Before entering college, she thought that she wanted to become a physician, but after completing a number of courses and doing in--a range of fields--and doing some lab research, she's opening up her vistas to other possibilities.

Nadja: Taylor, it is so nice to have you here today, so thank you for joining us. And I love that you're both a science major and a religious studies major, it's so awesome. As a scientist myself, I think that's really brave and amazing, and I'm just wondering, you know, we've been talking here about blurring the lines with improvisation and navigating different spaces to create with each other. What does this look like for you in your life?

Taylor: It looks very similar to what everyone was talking about. What I resonated the most with is when Dr. Haines was talking, like you said everybody improves everyday, like, you just do, without even knowing. But my main thing when I improv every day is to be present in the

moment because students, we get lost in our day-to-day schedules; everything is set but everything changes. Like, for example, today, when Dr. Ali asked me yesterday to be on it...

[All laughing]

Nadja: We gave you tons of notice!

Taylor: Like, less than 24 hours, that was plenty of time but I had something that I do during this time every week, but I was able to just move some stuff around. Like, it wasn't what I thought I was going to be doing today [and] I ended up doing it anyways.

Nadja: Thank you for being here. That's so great.

Omar: Yeah, thank you.

Taylor: No problem. Yeah, so that's how I improv throughout my day most of the time, every day. [Laughing]

Omar: That's great, that's great. So how does this look like in terms of your... like, in a classroom; so you're studying science, you're studying the humanities, and in some ways there's been these divisions that have been set up, right? And so sometimes, I mean we've spoken about this, you're having to navigate these worlds and so maybe you could speak about your experiences.

Taylor: For example, in my religion classes, it's very interesting to see, especially from the science point of view, when people are talking most of the time, not only in my religion classes but in my science classes as well, I'm able to talk about a lot of things because I have the viewpoint from both sides. Like, yesterday, a Ph.D. student that I work with in my research lab, she was reading an article--a paper--and a scientist said, "I'm a Catholic scientist," and it was about bees. She was like, "What do you think about that? How do these things correlate in your mind?"

Nadja: You're the resident expert!

Taylor: I was like, "Yeah, that's very interesting." I've never heard of that before, but that's very interesting that I could see my two fields coming together in those ways.

Omar: So, how do you think about this notion of being intentional? Because I think that we go through our lives like, you know, it's very busy, and I think that Steve has been working to be very intentional in his life and being very present. How have you worked to develop that skill and how you do what you do?

Taylor: Like how Dr. Haines was talking about, just being present is a way to be intentional, especially as a student, we're very busy and we just go to one thing to the next, and best way to wear very busy and we just go to one thing to the next very very quickly. For example, if I'm in my research lab, I might be tired sometimes because I'm coming from, like, a very long day of classes but when I'm in that space I'm very intentional. I want to learn everything that I can

learn; I want to be very present. I'm around a bunch of Ph.D. students, I'm an undergrad, I want to soak up all of this knowledge. I want to be here, I want to have a good conversation. I'm being present and intentional in this moment talking to all of you.

Omar: Right, right!

Taylor: Like this is definitely a great experience as an undergrad, like I'm having this intentional conversation and I'm soaking up everything.

Omar: And, by the way, Taylor pulled an all-nighter last night, so she is actually being very present right now.

[All laughing]

Steve: You really are.

Nadja: Taylor, do you mind if I ask what research group you're working in?

Taylor: I'm working with **Dr. Casey Remmin [SP?]**. So we work on bees and we focus on microbiomes and how that affects--

Nadja: Bee microbiomes. Which is then possibly translatable to--what's the interest in the bee microbiome?

Taylor: Well, we're looking at bacteria and how the bacteria is important and how it affects bees because, we know, bees are on the decline.

Nadja: Right. Bees are having a rough time. So it's sort of about understanding bee conservation?

Taylor: Yeah. And every student in the lab, they work on something different, but it's mostly with bacteria and how it affects microbiomes.

Nadja: Cool. That is so nice. I couldn't resist hearing a little about your science, it's awesome! I love it.

Omar: Well, it's been a great conversation. We just want to thank you, Steve and Taylor, for creating this conversation together.

Nadja: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely beautiful.

Steve: I have one more question for you, Taylor. I just don't know how you do what you do. A double major, and they're so far, they're just so--

Nadja: She doesn't sleep, Steve, we already heard that.

Steve: Oh yeah right, that's how you do it!

[All laughing]

Taylor: Yeah, no sleep and I'm just interested. Like, when I go to my classes, I just like to be present. I like to listen.

Steve: Imagine that. Well...

Nadja: You're what make our job worth doing, Taylor. Your future is very bright!

Steve: Absolutely.

Omar: That's great. Well, thank you both very much.

Nadja: Thank you so much.

Steve: Our pleasure.

Taylor: Yeah, my pleasure. Thank you.

Omar: Bye bye.

Nadja: Many thanks to the University Teaching and Learning Center that provided the recording studio; to Ashley Scott, who did our logo; to Lloyd International Honors College; to University Communications, including our production team, Matt Bryant and Ben Peterson. If you're interested in learning more about the work that Steve Haines is doing, please check out the links associated with this podcast.