

Active Hope - A podcast collaboration

Episode 2 Transcript

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: My name is Marc Bamuthi Joseph. I am a poet, I'm a dad, I'm an educator.

Kamilah Forbes: I am Kamilah Forbes. I am a storyteller, a director, a producer, a wife, a mother, a

Kamilah Forbes: For the Apollo Theater. This is Active Hope.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: This is Active Hope.

Ma Prestini: This Active Hope.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Hey, hey, hey, hey, what's good family?

Ma Prestini: Good afternoon. Hi.

Kamilah Forbes: Hey.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Hi. What an outstanding pleasure to be with you all again. We're here to not only
the energy of the last year but to metabolize it in some way towards healing.

Kamilah Forbes: That's right.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Thinking about art, creativity, and of course hope as an instrument of
ascending. So that's actually what's on the agenda for today. All three of us use our bodies in order to
e it. Art is a means of getting free. That is if we assume that freedom is an outcome of the body, that
dom isn't something to be legislated. And if freedom can't be legislated, neither can art, right?

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: But on the other hand, we live in a country of free bodies and also of
incarcerated bodies. There are more than three million people in jail in the United States of America, of

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: And that, that design works, that system is working. But the three of us are here to explore how the arts might design systemic freedom. That there's something about the words in our

Paola Prestini: And so, what I've been thinking about lately is a lot about the body, and how sometimes in moments of great conflict words don't suffice. It's a touch, it's a hug, it's the kind of liberatory act of dance, right? And when you're incarcerated, you don't have access to any of those things, right? It's a system of taking away, not of healing.

Paola Prestini: And so I think in terms of arts at the table, improvisation, the skills that we bring of risk-taking, this idea of constantly up for critique. Even the action of creating something new that forces you

people find power. And it's interesting because I think this generation goes to social media because there aren't checks and balance specifically for issues of sexual violence or race.

Paola Prestini: And what happens is that this culture creates a different kind of imprisonment for people who don't go through due process because of that. And so while you need that power to be able to express what's not right, it's a conundrum because in the end you end up in this place of, can you really call for abolition and yet also be stringing somebody up in ways that are not through due process?

Paola Prestini: Understanding that it's usually people who are oppressed, who go to those extremes. So these are the things that my son growing up in a social media laced reality, we talk about it, we have to.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah. I love talking to the two of you so much, maybe more than insight, we have these questions. And honestly, it's part of my mental health diet at this point. It's part of my hope diet to engage with folks that are willing to ask questions like this. We're really fortunate to have a conversation with another individual.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: The folks that are listening to us know Van Jones is a CNN commentator, know that he's a New York Times bestselling author, knows that he is a rabble-rouser, troublemaker. And also knows like us that art is essential instrument in not only activating hope but moving us towards the logistics of American promise. So what we want to share is a little bit of the conversation that I had with the good brother Van Jones. So why don't we roll that right now?

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: I'm here with the incredible intellect, good friend, and I'm really appreciative of you, Van Jones, for joining us here on the Active Hope podcast. Where we want to begin today is just with a kind of open imagining of freedom. And we often think of freedom as ephemeral, we think of it as a legislative reality, but on the podcast, we think of freedom as an engineerable phenomenon.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Which is to say that if we can design a system to deport us and we can design a system to incarcerate us, then we can also design freedom. So the first question for you is philosophical. Do you think that it is possible to choreograph social justice? Can we design freedom? And if yes, what are the materials or the DNA building blocks for you of a freedom design?

Van Jones: Well, it's a liberating question. There's some freedom just in the question. And just stretching into trying to answer the question gives you some freedom right there. The freedom I think that we always have some access to is the inner freedom. That you get from meditation, from prayer, from therapy, from yoga, from reading ancient scripture, from being in community with others, listening to a certain kind of music.

Van Jones: And for me, I used to think that change was bottom-up, the radical folks, challenging the system. That's a part of it. Then I was in the White House for a while, we were trying to do a top-down, from government-down and that's a part of it. But I think the most important transformation and the most important freedom is inside-out.

Van Jones: It's bottom-up plus top-down times inside-out. How much inside-out personal transformation are the people who are trying to make the change happen? How much of that have they done? Because then, the bottom-up social movements and cultural movements, and the top-down

technological plays out of Silicon Valley and out of Wall Street and out of Washington, D.C., all those can only get you so far.

Van Jones: It's those two times, not plus, times the inside-out transformation and the ability to achieve freedom in oneself. Whether you're in the jailhouse or the White House, and you know I spent time in both places. How much freedom can you find in yourself in those places? And then you can expand freedom for yourself and others through those places.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: We talk about freedom where I lead with freedom because, our belief is that the state of incarceration is in very many ways the antithesis of a state of freedom. But I know that you're working really hard through the REFORM Alliance in response to that. So I just would love for you to talk a little bit about what you're doing tactically in response to the current design of the carceral state.

Van Jones:

many people, some deeply and some in a shallow way, the private sector is going to try to figure out what to do. You're going to see something called almost like a fair chance.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah.

Kamilah Forbes: That's right.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph:

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: I love it. Sometimes Kamilah you'd be saying stuff that just it's like a Bootsy Collins, just make me want to...

Kamilah Forbes: You just feel the beat.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: It's like a Clyde Stubblefield, just make me want to just screw up my face, like, ew, it's crazy that the cultural doula just did that. That was the Bootsy baseline just now, that was just the wicked lick. But yeah, the part of the interview with Van, we work with boards and their lawyers on our boards. And there are politicians on our boards and there are these scions of industry that are adjacent to cultural institutions, we need that intelligence.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: But we also started talking about, well, where is the artist intelligence on the corporate board? How many artists are on the board of Citibank, or the board of Boeing, or other corporate entities? And why is it important that it goes both ways? And it's not again, just about a sense of hope but it really is about the deployment of a particular kind of intelligence in political and corporate structures.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: And germane to what we've been talking about today to think about if we go back to this idea that an artist uses the body in order to leave it, then where is the artist on the board or in the design structure of the prison industrial complex? In all cases, this is not a zero sum game, this is not about absolutes.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: In the most democratic way possible, it's about a conversation about how we think of human beings and at whater[-391162.2(96)9aic88(m)6.3((T29(a)03.1(xA)f2.0).136)1.3(p13.1(a)3.2.66)1.3(ab)3..01i

installation, and art. The work contextualizes and facilitates a space to explore interpersonal accountability, and reflect those values back on our criminal justice system.

Paola Prestini:

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: For the Washington National Opera project that we're doing called Monuments.

Paola Prestini: There is.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah.

Paola Prestini: Well, thank you to you both.

Kamilah Forbes: Absolutely Paola. Thank you, Paola.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Catch you on the other side.

Kamilah Forbes: Take care.

Paola Prestini: Till soon.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Peace.

Paola Prestini: Today you heard artistic selections from Daniel Bernard Roumain, Marc Bamuthi Joseph, Asha Bandele, Samora Pinderhughes, Adam Drayson, Brianna Mims, Tanya Tagaq, Nels Cline, Jeffrey Zeigler, and Glenn Kotche. Special, special thanks to our guest Van Jones. Our producer is Sapir Rosenblatt and our project manager is Paige Lester.

Paola Prestini: The live event for this episode was hosted by the multimedia team at the Kennedy Center. I'm Paola Prestini here with Marc Bamuthi Joseph and Kamilah Forbes. This is Active Hope. Thank you for listening.

Jehbreal Jackson: [singing] Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home. Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home. [music fades out]