

The Hum Podcast

Episode 37: "Art Overcomes Politics"

[Theme music fades in]

Speech: Art, to me, overcome politics, religion. It enables somebody to reach another person, sometimes without even speaking and in all instances, it's a language that's broader than the English language. It's broader.

[Music increases in volume]

Gilad: You're listening to The Hum.

[Music fades out]

Simona: If you were alive at any point and listening to hip hop in the late 80s and early 90s, you would have definitely heard of the Grammy Award winning mega group Arrested Development. We're so honored to be joined here today by Arrested Development front man, Speech Thomas, who for several years worked on a music project in a Virginia prison that gave space to several incarcerated men to express themselves through the arts. The film is titled 16 Bars, and it recently had its international premiere at our eighth annual Human Rights Film Festival here in Toronto.

Simona: Speech, you are from the hip hop group Arrested Development and as someone who grew up with 90s hip hop as a soundtrack of their youth, this is a surreal moment and we are so grateful to have you here. Even if you don't know who Arrested Development is, the minute that the openings beat of People Every Day or Mr Wendal comes on, you know exactly what you're listening to. So we are so happy to have you today with us. How are you?

Speech: I'm doing fantastic. It's good to talk to you guys. It's really, really cool.

Gilad: Yeah, we're so stoked to have you. So we recently did the international premiere for a film you're a part of called 16 Bars, where you visited a prison in Virginia to run a music program with the residents there. Can you tell us a little bit more about how this project came to be?

Speech: I saw an interview on, well actually it was a documentary on CNN by Lisa Ling, that documented this particular jail in Virginia where they had a daddy-daughter dance and the fathers were able to interact with their children. And it was so human and it was so beautiful. I was like, whoever the sheriff is at this particular jail has a vision for these men and women. And my manager saw the same

special that I saw on CNN, and so we talked to each other and said, hey, we should reach out to this particular jail and see if we can go in. I say we, me and him work together, but me could go in and do music with the inmates and see if that would be something they'd be open to. And so we called and it started from there.

Gilad: Can you walk us through what your first day was like working with these men? Were there any surprises or challenges? Were you even nervous at all walking into a prison running this program?

Speech: I was very nervous because first of all, I'd never really done this type of work inside of a jail or prison. I've been in a women's prison and did some recording with an amazing woman named Debbie Pleeger in the past. But this was my time going into, which would be a men's prison. I did meet women at this prison, I mean, jail too. And so it was my first time and it was very different. I was nervous. I was curious as to what kind of response would they have to me. Were they going to be fans of the music? Would they be respectful and loving towards what I'm striving to do? Would they be offended? Would this be a conflict in a sense? I didn't know what to expect. And that in and of itself is what makes it so amazing when it turned out as great as it did.

Speech: And not just that, I knew I wanted to go in and do music with these men and women. So, not knowing who you're about to work with musically, in and of itself, take away the whole environment of a jail, just going into work with a total stranger musically can be nerve-racking because you don't know what to expect there too. So you see that angst, in a sense, in the film. And one of the biggest things that I wanted to do when I first walked into that jail, and you see it on film, is I wanted them to get to know who I am. So the first thing I did was sing or rhyme and that's what I do. And then second of all, I wanted to pick a song that best helped to explain my story. And the song I chose was Tennessee, and that for me is a very personal song and it, I believe, helped to break the ice.

Gilad: I'm a huge fan of the song Tennessee, I was rooting so hard when I saw it in the film. Can you tell us why Tennessee of all songs?

Speech: Well for me, Tennessee was the song that changed my life. It was the first song of the group's career, first single ever. But more importantly, the reason the song was written is, my favorite grandmother that I used to visit all the time every summer lived in Tennessee. She taught me so much. I learned so much from being around her. She had passed of a heart attack unexpectedly and my whole family went down to her funeral in Tennessee. And so me, my brother, my mother, my father, we all went to Tennessee and we celebrated her life.

Speech: We left there with a sense of just renewal and refreshing, and we're going to live our lives better. And that exact same week, my only brother, Terry would die and the last place I saw both of them was in Tennessee. And so, it rocked my world and you could tell by the chorus, "Take me to another place. Take me to another land. Make me forget all that hurts me and help me understand your plan." That's a prayer and it's a personal sentiment about pain and hurt and loss. So that's what that song was. And even though it's a celebration, to some extent, it's also a recognition of those who came before me and that was my brother and grandmother, in that instance.

Simona: What really comes clear is that there was a lot of trust needed to kind of move forward with working one-on-one with each of the individuals in the documentary. And you just mentioned that for you to kind of start with building that trust, you had to be very vulnerable. And you're working one-on-one with some of these individuals in a small space and they're talking about things that are really personal and things that they have gone through themselves. How did you build trust and make them feel comfortable enough to kind of share that? And then, how did you kind of help mentor them to kind of open up more, to share more?

Speech: Well, that's a skill that I learned years ago because I like working with new artists and whenever I work with new artists, more than likely I've had more success than them and they're a little intimidated by me. They feel like they're not worthy to work with me sometimes. And so, I've had to learn how to make myself very small when I'm around artists that are not literal peers to me. They haven't done the things that I've done in the industry. And so coming into that jail, I wanted to employ that skill because I wanted them to feel comfortable. And you'll notice throughout the film, most of the time I was listening more than talking. I wanted to just hear their story and I wanted to make sure that they knew that I was there to listen and I was there to make sure that their voices were heard, and that I was only a conduit. And that it wasn't going to be a Speech show and it wasn't going to be all about Speech, it was going to be about them.

Speech: And if they can believe that and if they can get into that really amazing space when you know that you're really supposed to express yourself right now, you're supposed to shine, then you could get some incredible performances. And that's what happened with, in my opinion, these four men. And then, it's just some really, really great music.

Gilad: What role do you feel art played in any of that process in building trust? Let's say we were to remove the music or remove any kind of art from that whole experience, would the same thing have happened?

Speech: In my opinion, no. That's why I think art is one of the greatest gifts that God ever gave the human race. Art, to me, overcomes politics, religion. It enables somebody to reach another person, sometimes without even speaking, and in all instances it's a language that's broader than the English language or the Spanish language or whatever language, it's broader. Music is just so important and the arts in general are so important, and in my opinion, it's a tool of God's to allow us as a human race to feel certain things and other things just can't reach that particular space.

Gilad: I'm so glad you're bringing that up and I'm not sure if you even know about the history of our film festival, but way before we even started a film festival, I myself was an activist and I was doing a lot of international development work. And I actually used to work with a lot of North Korean refugees in South Korea and here in Toronto as well, helping with resettlement. But while I was doing all that work my family was super confused, they just didn't understand why I was working with North Korean refugees, why I had devoted my life to doing that work. And so, nothing, nothing would get through to my mom. Nothing, nothing would get through to my family. They couldn't understand or become as passionate as I was. And then one day I was at my mom's house and I put on a documentary about North Korea and she broke down into tears. And that was sort of a Eureka moment for me.

Speech: Wow.

Gilad: That was when I realized film was able to do the one thing that nothing else could and that was get through to my mom. And so, that's really how the Human Rights Film Festival came to be, it's when I realized that art really more than anything is that conduit. It's kind of that gel, that glue that we need to bond people together.

Speech: I totally agree with that. And speaking of film, I thoroughly agree with that. This film, even while we strive to be activists with political issues, we've many times just had the place to film in front of legislators and in front of lawmakers and various people that can help to effect the change that we're all needing to see. We just had the place to film in front of them and leave our sort of speech behind and let the film do the talking. And so I totally agree with you with other mediums of the arts, it is the powerful thing that many times gets the job done.

Simona: I personally consider Arrested Development to be pioneers when it comes to conscious hip hop. And we've mentioned songs like People Every Day and Mr Wendal, but there's also again, Africa Inside Me and Tennessee, and so many more that have somewhat of a politically charged message to that. So I got to ask, Speech, do you consider yourself an activist with your music in that kind of taking that into these spaces?

Speech: I do, I do. To me, activism is any time you devote yourself to a cause that you truly have poured your life into and that is exactly what I and many others in the music world do. We pour our lives into striving to change the circumstances of people through the way that we best do it. Some people speak, some people are literal organizers, they're the underground organizers. They're the people behind the march of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, or what have you. Others are whatever, but for me, I'm an artist and that's my way of activism. So yeah, I definitely think it is a form of activism.

Simona: Was there any challenges kind of bringing that activism mindset into the prison system, which is so focused on, it's not about rehabilitation, it is about temporarily housing these until the next step, either into more incarceration or kind of spun out into the community?

Speech: What I loved about this particular in jail, and that's why I reached out to them, Sheriff C.T. Woody, who is no longer the sheriff there, at the time he was the sheriff and his vision was clear, he did want to see men get redemption and have a chance to get out and be productive and be amazing fathers, sons, and members of our society. And so, I loved the fact that he already had that visit and that he could see the value of having a Speech or any other artists, I'm sure, but having a Speech, in particular, with my background and my political contribution, having me come in and being with these men, he saw that value.

Gilad: Did he understand the film that you guys were making? I remember, I was having a conversation with Sim-

Speech: None of us did.

Gilad: None of you guys did. At what point did you realize what film you were making?

Speech: To be honest with you, yeah. And to be honest, doing a documentary, especially if you're going in from scratch and you're not directing it in a particular way that you want it to go, it always is a surprise. You're allowing the narrative of the people that you're talking to, to determine the direction of this film. So yes, we did know we wanted to make music. Yes, we knew that I'm Speech from Arrested Development and that that would be something that probably would work with these men because all of them did know who Arrested Development was already, so that was an honor for them. So we knew that we could get in and we could at least do some recording. We knew that part. We didn't know how good or bad the recordings would be. We definitely didn't know where their lives and journeys were going to go and we didn't know how much some that we could capture. Even if we did know what their journeys were going, how do you capture that on film and how do you make that an honest and real window into their lives?

Speech: So, none of us really knew. And in fact, Sheriff C.T. Woody, we spent a ton of time with him on film that wasn't used at all in the film. I spent the night in the prison or in the jail, in the actual cell. None of that even made, it was all on the cutting room floor. So we definitely didn't know exactly which direction this would go until we just started immersing ourselves into it.

Simona: Does this program or the experience change you in any way and also, did you think that it made an impact in some of the men that you worked with in their lives?

Speech: It made me see them as more human. I was like many who... I understood the injustice of the criminal justice system, the disparities between Black and white, the disparities between Black, Brown, and white. But I did not understand just how incredibly passionate, human, intelligent and three-dimensional these men and women were until I met them. And then I started to see another injustice that I really didn't see before and that was, we are locking away a part of our society that have so much to give to us, whether through the arts or through their intellect, or through their parenthood, or their relationships, or whatever. But they have so much to give to us and we are losing out as a country and as a society when these, especially the unjust laws of locking away people for a drug illness and an addiction that's an illness as opposed to putting people into treatment.

Gilad: You touched upon illness a little bit and so while Sam was here, and I'll just preface it, Sam Bathrick, the director of the film, 16 Bars. While he was here we were having a really good chat about mental health and how much of a role that plays in mass incarceration. Can you tell us a little bit more about your thoughts on mental health and the prison industrial complex?

Speech: First of all, the mental health piece for me, I think again, we are locking up many people who are struggling with mental health issues and I think our nation is not really prepared for that truth of really treating these people with the proper directions and treatments that they really deserve. And so a lot of them are just simply getting locked up. And our society is not ready to have that discussion either. The fact that many prisons are privatized gives literal incentives in the fact that many of our jails and prisons that aren't privatized, but are run by political campaigns that also have incentives to, quote unquote, clean up the streets and make people more simply comfortable in their neighborhoods and stuff. All of these things are leading to many, many unjust an unfortunate incarceration.

Speech: And then, not to mention all of the levels, whether it be even in the court system. Before the court system, on the streets, who's being locked up, who's being arrested in unjust numbers and ways. All of these things lead to what

we're seeing. Not to mention the white supremacy and racism that's been around for hundreds of years now that plays a huge role in who is exactly being locked up and what kind of numbers. When I walked in there, the jail was filled with, unfortunately I'm going to say 90% Black men. There's reasons for those types of numbers and that's what I'm referring to with this whole prison industrial complex and the things that are going on behind the scene.

Simona: Why don't you think society is ready to kind of have a different conversation around formerly incarcerated people?

Speech: I think it's because the rich people who tend to create the conversations and own some of the biggest mediums and media that help form our compensations, they don't want those conversations to happen. There's a certain normality that they want to continue or a normalcy that they want to continue in order to keep profits high and businesses to run as business as usual, as they say.

Gilad: And I'm also wondering, how important is language, how we address these men and these women who are coming outside of prison and what can we do as communities to support these people when they come outside of prison? What can we do to, let's say, break the stigma of incarceration?

Speech: In my opinion, one of the things we can do, and I think we tapped into it at the film, is us as a community being willing to have programs in our local businesses for these men and women to come out and participate in. But even in a deeper sense, while they're in jail or prison, fighting for legislation and the laws to change to where we can have corporations go in and help train people while they're there and do more of that. I mean, there's some of that going on now, but there needs to be a lot more of that so that men and women coming out of jail and prison do have a place that they can go with skillsets that they have already in tow. It's sticking with people and believing in people, and so on and so forth.

Speech: And so to me, that's what this is about. And that's what I think that this program that I did, which is really part of a bigger program, with the Real Life Program, the whole transitioning back into society. All of those are examples of love and the people that give their time to that, I tip my hat to them.

Gilad: It's such a wonderful program and obviously so necessary. I mean, you can see the impact that this program had on everyone and you can hear it in your words, the conviction in your words. Is this a common sort of thing, does this happen in other prisons? Is there enough of this?

Speech: There's not enough of it. And the stats and all of the studies that have been done on it show that it's highly effective. And so the reason there's not as much, if I

had to guess, is that politically it doesn't sound right in small soundbites. It makes it seem as if people that have done, quote unquote, wrong are getting all of these free services and getting all of this love, and getting all of these programs that people on the outside aren't even getting in many instances. And so, it doesn't play well for politics in many instances and so many states don't adopt these things, but the stats actually show that they do really well.

Gilad: How important is it to screen this kind of film in non-traditional settings? We were very honored and thank you so much for allowing us to be the international premiere of this film. It was the first time it was ever screened outside of the United States, here in Toronto. It was though in a-

Speech: Exactly.

Gilad: Yeah. It was screened in a traditional setting though in a cinema at a festival. But any thought put towards screening this outside of cinemas, outside of festivals, and maybe in classrooms or prisons?

Speech: We are already in the midst of getting this film in smaller and community settings, whether it be at churches or in homes, but also as we've said at the question and answer during the film, in front of legislators and lawmakers and people that have the opportunities to change things. So we want to put it in front of as many people as possible and including school. And other prisons by the way, so that's the other thing that we've been working on. So, it's been a great tool for all of those different places.

Gilad: Have the men had a chance to see the film and if they have, what were their thoughts?

Speech: Yes, all of them have been able to see the film. They had a variety of thoughts. Teddy, has literally been to a number of film festivals and he's deeply moved by the film. But also not just moved by it emotionally, because of the film, he's been given so many different opportunities. I mean, the first time we ever screened the film he was there. He got on stage and some incredibly kindhearted people and loving people were willing to give money, which they gave to his treatment and to get him off the streets. In the thousands, by the way. And then other incredibly cool people were able to give treatment, literally give him a scholarship to go, which one's worth 50 to \$60,000, a full ride to treatment.

Speech: And Garland Carr, he loved the film and through the advance that we were able to give him, which was extremely modest, for doing this album, which the album is out now. It's on all the streaming services, it's called, 16 Bars. Through that advance, he was able to buy a ring for his now wife who you see in the film,

Kelly, he was able to buy her a ring and they were able to get married. So I mean, these are just two examples of the ways that it has changed their lives.

Speech: But also I'll say, Anthony saw the film and he had mixed emotions about it. Anthony has, and those that have seen the film, you know all these people I'm talking about, but Anthony has a little bit more of a sort of like, I don't know, just a negative sort of way of seeing some of this stuff. He's never had anyone that really loved him and he shared that in the film when he was talking to Sarah, when he first got out of prison. And it always impacts me when I see it, impacted me when I see it, it's like he said, "I know where I'm going, like I'm going to go down the block and to the left. And after that I don't know where I'm going to go." And so, his life has been such that the lessons he's learned is that none of this stuff really amounts to anything and there's always a catch to it. And so, sort of that's how he sort of felt. It's like, well, that was cool, but now what? And so that was where he was at.

Speech: And then, Devonte, loved the film and was very moved. But his family life and certain things that he's experienced in his family has kept him in an unfortunate cycle. And so right now for him, he and his mother, last that we talked at least, are unfortunately behind bars. And I don't know if you noticed in the film, and he talks about it, but his mother was involved in the drug game on a high level for decades and she has finally been caught and now she's behind bars and he happens to be behind bars as well. So, he did love the film, but there's different outcomes for different people.

Speech: And we always say this whenever we talk about this film, we met these four people that you've now met by seeing the film. It was totally divine and arbitrary. I mean, arbitrary or divine, whatever your belief system is. Because if we would have went two months later or five months earlier, it would have been a whole another set of people in that particular jail. Because by nature jails are transitional, people are on their way to prison or they're about to be released or something. So, when you talk about how did these four men turn out and how did they like the film, I think it could have been a totally different outcome with totally different men and the outcome that we saw is just the one that it is, it is what it is. And that's sort of the beauty and the realities of doing a documentary.

Simona: So is there ever... Do you find yourself kind of trying to bring in other artists to support this type of work as well or sharing your experiences with other artists, the band, other people that you think could bring a higher profile to what's going on?

Speech: I do. And that's a great question. I want to be real about it. The truth is, it's hard because by nature the music industry has become less and less of an independent artist driven reality and it has become more of a corporate

philosophy type of industry. And so, a lot of artists are just trying to stay relevant and unfortunately they're scared to death, because they feel like if they make one move that makes them seem like they're conscious or an activist, then they won't get accepted in certain crowds. And then if they become too "preachy", they won't get accepted in certain crowds and so they play it very safe. And that's not a judgment, I understand that struggle because it's tough. And at the same time, that's the reality I've faced even before this film.

Speech: There's a lot of artists that are just, to be honest, scared. They're scared to be fully themselves. They see it as a privilege to be able to make money from the things that they love to do and so they just keep playing by the book and they keep making songs that they think will rattle the least amount of feathers or cages and ruffle the least amount of feathers and keep it moving. And I found that to be a tough dilemma as an artist when it comes to comradery without an artist. And that's just my own personal view of how I've seen things.

Gilad: As a self-defined activist who uses music as a tool to teach and to raise awareness of human rights issues, do you worry about the state of music in the way you just described it?

Speech: I do. I do. And also, I don't want it to seem all grim. I love music. I still think that it offers an amazing service. And yet, just to land on the side that I do think is dark, and I discussed this in another documentary I did called, *The Nigga Factory*, and it's on YouTube and I definitely want to encourage you to check it out. But, I do worry about how music is being used and how its power is being used to sort of corral people and to group-think in a negative way, and not allow people to really have their own individual contributions and views on the world and therefore help the world in the way that they're supposed to. I believe that everybody is divinely inspired by the Creator to bring something to this world that we never had before. And their experiences, their particular life and where they came from is supposed to be sort of the battery that gives them the charge to give us whatever they're supposed to give us.

Speech: And unfortunately the music industry, on the other hand, has become such a sort of one size fits all way in general. I mean there's exceptions, but in general, a one size fits all and it erases a lot of the individuality and the individual messages, and views, and thoughts that people would normally be able to share in their art. So I often say, and I say this in my documentary, *the N-word Factory*, I often say there used to be in the late 80s and early 90s, such a diversity of thought. I mean, and I talk about this in part two of the *Nigga Factory*, you could have a KRS-One song called *Illegal Business*, and it's talking about the drug game and it's saying how the government imports drugs in order to make money for politics and for governmental thing, and it talks about corrupt cops also taking money and being part of the problem instead of being part of the solution.

Speech: And then at the exact same year, same time period, you got a Public Enemy who will do a song called, Night of the Living Baseheads, where it's talking about baseheads who, basically people that have become addicted to crack and the black people in the community selling to these people and further corrupting the community instead of finding other ways to make money and make ends meet, even though times are tough and there's oppression. So, you've got that song, all coming out at the exact same time. My point is, is that there needs to be diversity of thought so that people can, number one, be real people and holistic human beings, but also so that we as listeners can enjoy music and enjoy the power of music and dance and party and all of that stuff, but still be entertained by the full of humanity instead of just one particular viewpoint of humanity. And that's what we're seeing more and more of today, this one particular sort of view.

Simona: How do we ensure that we are advocating to our politicians, that we are encouraging and supporting organizations doing work around rehabilitation of formerly incarcerated people? What are we as the community, what do we need to do to actually support this part of society that is consistently forgotten or pushed under the rug?

Speech: I think that's a great question. What I would do is get involved with the on the ground activists that are dealing with transition, getting people back into society, but also dealing with reform. Because even the politicians, they all speak a good game. For instance, our President of the United States right now, President Trump, he speaks a good game and he he talks about prison reform all of the time and says positive things like we need to do it and we're going to give this much money to it. But the on the ground activists are the ones that hold his feet to the fire to actually make sure he does it, because there's a long distance between saying what you're going to do and having a platform that says what you're all about and then actually carrying it out.

Speech: So what you'll see is, for instance, some politicians will say, yeah, we're going to give \$72 million to this, and then they only get \$14 million. Well, the problem with that is, sure, it's good that they gave \$14 million, but the needs that were there, it needed to be the \$72 million and even that wouldn't have covered all the needs. So when you give \$14 million, it allows you to say that you're doing a lot, but you're really not doing a lot. And so, holding people's feet to the fire, researching some of the on the ground organizations in your community or in your country to make sure that they are able, empower them so that they are able to hold the real politician's feet to the fire to do what they say they're going to do.

Gilad: You briefly plugged this project and 16 Bars, and the music, but I want you to take more time and take all the space you need. How can we listen to some of

the music that these men made and how can we support 16 Bars, you and this project?

Speech: So, you can support me by going to brotherspeech.com, sign my mailing list. I have so many projects that are coming out. I mentioned a couple even in this conversation, so you can support me in that way and I deeply appreciate it. Follow me on social media. You can support these men by buying this album. You can obviously stream it, but those that don't know, streaming doesn't really make a lot of money. All the net proceeds for this record go straight to these men. So we found a way to do that, it took about two years for us to work out those details, because usually anyone that's incarcerated can't make money off the things they do while they're incarcerated. So we worked that out, it will benefit them. So I would highly encourage people to buy the vinyl record. We have a vinyl record available. You can get it on Amazon, but you can go to brotherspeech.com and you'll see links to 16 Bars, the film, and you can go from there and get all of that. Yeah, I would encourage that.

Speech: And then if you want to do some volunteer work, obviously there is numerous places probably in each person's, wherever you're listening from, in each person's city where you can help with transition work yourself. There's so much that we all can offer these men and women, I mean, whether it's job training, whether it's helping them to understand how to do a resume, whether it's helping them to learn music, whether it's helping them to better deal with conflict resolution. There's so many issues that we could just lend our time to. So for those that are inclined to just be more in-person and help that way, I would definitely encourage you to get involved with the people that are in your local city.

Gilad: Speech, thank you so much. It was a huge honor for us to chat with you today. This is super random and completely unconnected to your project, but I grew up watching Vince Carter, I know you guys have him on the Hawks now. I don't know if you're a basketball fan or not, but if you ever go to a game, I think it's his last year, give him our love from the city. We love him.

[Theme music fades in]

Speech: I will. I definitely will, man.

Simona: Thank you.

Speech: I appreciate that, yeah.

Simona: Thanks so much, Speech. This has been amazing.

Speech: You guys are amazing. Thank you for having me. I really appreciate it.

Gilad: My name's Gilad Cohen.

Simona: And I'm Simona Ramkisson.

Gilad: This podcast is edited and produced by Brandon Fragomeni and Alex Castellani. Our associate producer is Ron Ma.

Simona: This is an initiative of JAYU, a charity that shares human rights stories through the arts.

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Gilad: If you enjoyed this podcast, help us make more of them by donating whatever you can. Visit us online at jayu.ca/donate.