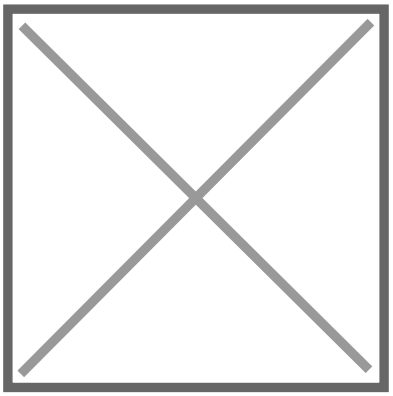

If You Know the Soundtrack: A Conversation with Dr. Kofi J. Adisa on Music, Community, and Memory

Description

â??If you know the soundtrack of my life, youâ??ll know whatâ??s in my heart, mind, and soul.â?•
â??Kofi. J Adisa

This past week, I spoke with **Kofi J. Adisa** over Zoom about music, memory, and the work of listening. What follows is a reflection on that exchange, along with the full conversation and a playlist of songs that surfaced throughout it.

We first met in Cleveland after his March 2026 Chairâ??s Address at the Conference on College Composition and Communication. The room had just given him a standing ovation. What stayed with me wasnâ??t a particular claim or point, but the feeling it producedâ??recognition, yes, but something more difficult to name, a sense of connection that felt both immediate and shared.

ð??§ **Listen to the full conversation:**

Before Writing, There Was Sound

Long before theory, before academic language, before even the idea of writing as a practice, there was music. Adisa describes growing up in Washington, D.C., moving through the city on buses and trains, always listening. Music wasnâ??t background noise or something to turn on and off; it was constant, a presence that helped him make sense of whatever moment he was in.

Thereâ??s a particular kind of recognition in that experience. A song can meet you exactly where you are, often before you have the words to explain it yourself. For Adisa, that relationship became instinctive, shaping not only how he listened but how he communicated.

Even something as ordinary as an answering machine became a form of expression. Instead of speaking, he would let a song playâ??thirty seconds of R&B or jazz that said everything he didnâ??t need to. People would hear it and understand, or at least feel something, and that distinction becomes central to how he thinks about meaning. Again and again, he returns to the idea that feeling is not separate from knowledge, but one of its most important forms.

Learning to Hear

When Adisa talks about becoming an English major, he does not begin with writing. He begins with listening. He remembers a professor reading **Flannery Oâ??Connor** out loud, not simply reading but performingâ??shaping the rhythm of each sentence and allowing the language to move through the room in a way the printed page alone could not. Part of what made that moment resonate was the way Oâ??Connorâ??s work brings together the textures of Southern life with a distinctly Catholic moral vision, giving her language both familiarity and depth.

In that moment, what struck him was not the content of the story, but its sound. â??I want to sound like that,â• he remembers thinking, and the distinction matters. It shifts the focus from writing as a visual or intellectual act to something embodied and auditoryâ??something that must be heard and felt as much as understood.

Later, it was **Ernest J. Gaines** who offered a different kind of recognitionâ??one shaped not only by familiarity, but by curiosity. Gainesâ??s writing carried the cadence of community, a language that felt lived rather than imposed. Not all academic language fits, Adisa suggests; you can admire it, study it, and even love it, and still feel that it does not reflect how you think or speak. Gaines offered something else entirelyâ??a voice that felt familiar, yet still drew you in, asking you to listen more closely. That combination of familiarity, curiosity, and recognition made all the difference. As Adisa explains, music is â??essentialâ?¦ in the ways in which we talk about our strugglesâ?¦ in the ways in which we talk about just to love one another,â• a practice that, he notes, we â??lean intoâ?¦ mostly as human beings, but definitely as African-Americans.â•

â??Music is essential in the ways in which we talk about our struggles, in the ways in which we talk about just to love one anotherâ?¦ We lean into the musicâ??mostly as human beings, but definitely as African-Americans.â•
â??Kofi J. Adisa

A Continuum of Sound: Black Musical Traditions as Living Archive

As the conversation deepens, it becomes clear that when Adisa talks about music, he is not simply talking about genre but about lineage. He describes a continuum of Black musical traditions that carry memory across generations, not as static artifacts, but as living, moving forms of knowledge. He names voicesâ??**Lou Rawls**, **Teddy Pendergrass**, **Shirley Horn, Patti LaBelle**â??artists whose music shaped not only his own experience, but entire cultural soundscapes.

These artists are not simply performers; they are carriers of history. As he puts it, they are â??not frozen in a moment,â?• but continue to move, and that movement is what matters. What he describes is not nostalgia but continuity, a refusal of the idea that music belongs to a single time or place. Instead, it circulates, returns, and reappears in new forms while still holding the weight of what came before.

This becomes especially visible in his discussion of sampling, where contemporary artists like **Larry June** draw from earlier recordings not simply to replicate them but to carry them forward. A Lou Rawls track becomes something else, and yet not entirely something new; the original remains embedded within it.

â??When you hear Lou Rawls,â?• he explains, â??it always hearkens back to something that you can touch and feel again.â?• There is a tactile quality to the way he describes sound, something that exists beyond abstraction, and it is here that the conversation expands beyond individual memory into cultural memory.

In this way, music becomes a form of community storytellingâ??one that carries struggle and intimacy, love and survival, often all at once. Adisa describes how people â??lean into the musicâ?• to process their experiences, suggesting that music is not separate from life, but a way of understanding and sharing it. Even love, he notes, is layered and complicated, and music holds that complexity in ways language alone cannot.

Adisa brings this idea down to the level of everyday life, where recognition doesnâ??t require explanation:

> **â??If weâ??re at a grocery store and a song comes overâ?¦ itâ??s a song that you both really likeâ??thatâ??s a relationship.â?• â??Kofi J. Adisa**

In that moment, recognition happens without explanation. As Adisa suggests, when we understand ourselves and our relationships to others, even something as simple as hearing a song in a grocery store can create a shared moment between strangers.

Airwaves, Classrooms, and Community

Music, for Adisa, is never confined to a single space. It moves between roomsâ??between the bus, the home, and the classroomâ??and just as easily across institutions and communities. The same attentiveness he describes in listening to music carries into the way he understands teaching.

Before his current role at Towson University, he spent years teaching at Howard Community College, working with students whose relationships to language, education, and authority were as varied as the soundscapes he describes growing up with. Community colleges, like radio, are often misunderstood as transitional spacesâ??temporary, functional, secondaryâ??but that framing misses what actually happens there. They are, more accurately, spaces of convergence.

Students arrive carrying different histories, different rhythms of speech, and different ways of knowingâ??many of which do not immediately align with academic expectations. And yet, like the radio spaces Adisa remembers, these environments hold the possibility of connection. What made D.C. radio powerful, he suggests, was not just the music itself, but the way it was shared.

Stations shaped by influential voices like **Melvin Lindsay** and **Donnie Simpson** did more than broadcast soundâ??they created community through it. Late-night programming like *The Quiet Storm*, developed by **Melvin Lindsay** and inspired by **Smokey Robinson**â??s *A Quiet Storm*, offered more than a playlist; it created a collective experience. Across the city, strangers listened at the same time, entering the same emotional atmosphere and moving through the same sonic landscape. It was public, but intimate; communal, but deeply personal.

Adisa returns to the idea that feeling is not separate from knowledge, but one of its most important forms. What emerges from this is a way of listening that feels closer to what musicians practice: not simply hearing notes, but attending to cadence, flow, and the subtle shifts in timing and tone that shape how something is felt as much as how it is understood. In improvisational spaces, this kind of listening becomes essentialâ??musicians respond in real time, shaping meaning together, sensing when to enter, when to hold back, and when to move in a new direction. This attentiveness echoes in the work of artists like **Art Blakey**, **Shirley Horn**, and **Al Green**, where phrasing, timing, and presence matter as much as the notes themselves. This kind of listening requires attention not just to what is said, but to how it moves, what lingers, and what might otherwise go unnoticed. It is a practice of attunement, one that makes meaning relational rather than fixed, and it does not stay confined to music; it moves with him into language, writing, and eventually the classroom.

ð??µ Explore the soundtrack:

What We Lose When We Stop Listening

At some point, the conversation shiftsâ??almost imperceptiblyâ??into the classroom. Into teaching. Into the ways we are trained to speak, explain, and guide. And this is where Adisaâ??s reflection sharpens into something closer to critique:

> **â??There are too many of us who cannot listen because we have not learned how to be silent.â?• â??Kofi J. Adisa**

Itâ??s a simple idea, but it lands heavily. Silence, especially in academic spaces, is often treated as a problemâ??something to fill, something to move past, something that signals confusion, disengagement, or lack. But what if silence is something else entirely? What if it is spaceâ??space for thought, for hesitation, for the slow process of figuring something out before it is spoken aloud?

Adisa suggests that the problem isnâ??t that students donâ??t have anything to say. Itâ??s that theyâ??ve been conditioned not to say itâ??conditioned to listen for the â??rightâ?• answer, to defer to authority, to treat knowledge as something external, something delivered rather than something built in relation. And in that process, something gets lost.

This critique resonates with a broader body of scholarship that challenges how academic systems shape what counts as knowledge and who gets to express it. Works like **Joshua Eylerâ??s** *Failing Our Future*, **Ruha Benjaminâ??s** *Imagination Manifesto*, and **Adam J. Banksâ??s** *Digital Griots* each, in different ways, push against rigid structuresâ??whether through critiques of grading, calls to reimagine educational possibility, or attention to the cultural and rhetorical significance of Black traditions. In

conversation, they reflect a shared concern: that learning becomes constrained when it is reduced to measurement, abstraction, or distance from lived experience.

Teaching as Relation

What Adisa describes is not a rejection of academia, but a reorientation of it.

> **â??Iâ??d rather be a professor that talks with students than to them.â•â??Kofi J. Adisa**

It sounds simple, but it requires a fundamental shift in how we understand teaching itselfâ??not as transmission or authority, but as relation. In this framework, the classroom becomes a space where students are not empty vessels, but participantsâ??where their experiences, their voices, and their ways of knowing are not secondary, but essential. Listening, in this sense, is not passive; it is active, intentional, and ongoing.

This kind of teaching isnâ??t easy. It takes time, requires trust, and often feels uncertain. But it opens the possibility for something else to emergeâ??something less scripted, less predictable, and more alive. At Howard Community College, Adisa describes teaching not as delivering knowledge but as creating conditions in which students might begin to hear themselves differentlyâ??where they might recognize that the ways they already speak, think, and feel are not separate from writing but foundational to it.

And that requires listeningâ??not the kind of listening that waits for a correct answer, but the kind that attends to rhythm, hesitation, and tone, and notices what students bring into the room before it is translated into academic language. Because just as music moves through communityâ??carrying memory, struggle, and careâ??so do students. They arrive with their own soundtracks, their own ways of making meaning, and their own forms of knowledge that may not immediately fit institutional frameworks, but are no less real for that.

The question, then, is not how to replace those ways of knowing, but how to hear them. In this context, the classroom begins to resemble the radio space Adisa describesâ??not as a site of passive reception, but as a site of shared experience, a place where different voices coexist, overlap, and, occasionally, resonate, where listening becomes the condition for connection, and connection becomes the beginning of understanding.

Listening Forward

So what is the soundtrack of your life, and what is the soundtrack of your studentsâ?? lives? What would happen if we paused long enough to askâ??without rushing to answerâ??and listened not just for correctness, but for rhythm, memory, and meaning?

Maybe then, teaching would begin to feel less like instruction and more like connection. Maybe then, we could begin to understand one another in ways that actually matter. And maybe then, we would finally learn how to listen.

About Kofi Adisa

Linkedin

Kofi Adisaâ??who also writes as Kofi J. Adisa and previously published under the name **Joseph Kelly**, including under the byline **J.A. Kelly**â??is a scholar, writer, and educator working at the intersection of writing studies, music, and cultural memory.

His work spans creative, scholarly, and journalistic writing. His publications include the chapbook *Jahi Playin Indigo*, released under the name J. A. Kelly (his former initials and last name), and the short story *â??Hidden Wells,â?•* published under K. Jahi Adisa. His scholarly work appears in *Composition Studies*, where he explores the future of academic conferencing. Earlier in his career, he also wrote feature pieces for *The Washington Post* under the name J. A. Kelly.

Adisa currently serves as Assistant Director at Towson University, where he supports writing instruction and is developing graduate writing initiatives. He previously served as an Associate Professor of English at Howard Community College, where he taught writing and literature across a range of student populations.

His recent scholarly work engages questions of digital literacy, generative AI, and writing pedagogy, particularly in relation to critical and equitable approaches to emerging technologies. He has also contributed to national conversations as a member of the MLAâ??CCCC Joint Task Force on AI.

Kofi Adisaâ??s writing spans creative, scholarly, and journalistic forms, including:

- *â??Whatâ??s the Future for Academic Conferences and What Should be their Futureâ?•* (with Frankie Condon) and articles in *Composition Studies*
- *Hidden Wells* (published under the name K. Jahi Adisa)
- *Jahi Playin Indigo* (chapbook)
- Feature writing in *The Washington Post* (as J. A. Kelly)

Resources from the Conversation

Literature

- *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* â?? Flannery Oâ??Connor

Scholarship

- *Failing Our Future* â?? Joshua Eyler
- *Imagination Manifesto* â?? Ruha Benjamin
- *Digital Griots* â?? Adam J. Banks

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1. Spotlight

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1. Aurality
2. Author Interview
3. Black Culture
4. Black Intellectual Tradition
5. Black Music
6. Black Musical Traditions
7. Community
8. Community Knowledge
9. Composition Studies
10. Conversation Series
11. Critical Pedagogy
12. Cultural Memory
13. Cultural Rhetorics
14. Digital Rhetoric
15. Education Reform
16. Embodied Knowledge
17. Feature Essay
18. Higher Education
19. Interview
20. Jazz
21. Learning Through Listening
22. Listening
23. Listening Culture
24. lived experience
25. Music and Memory
26. Music as Archive
27. pedagogy
28. R&B
29. Rhetoric and Writing
30. Rhetorical Listening
31. Scholar Spotlight
32. Soul Music
33. Sound Studies
34. Soundtrack of Life
35. Soundwriting
36. Student Voice
37. Teaching and Learning
38. The Quiet Storm
39. Writing and Listening
40. Writing Studies

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