

A Conversation with Walter Lobyn Hamilton

On June 8, 2023, the artist sat down with Newfields' President & CEO, Dr. Colette Pierce Burnette, to talk about his life, art, and upcoming exhibition, *What I Have You Have*.

Colette: *What I Have You Have*, how did that come to you?

Lobyn: It's like this duality of reciprocity and also problems. Right? It can be both. If you have a misunderstanding, or miscommunication, you have a perception of me—now that's on me to deal with or not deal with. We deal with that a lot—How people see the working class or capitalism or pop culture and even down to cultural perception. I was speaking to a collector and that's one thing they would always say, and I never heard anybody say that...but they meant it.

What I Have You Have, there's that idea that "I have the spaces so you have the spaces." "I have this knowledge, now you have this knowledge"—also works with trauma [laughs]—but maybe you can do something about it. There's this

transforming, or this passing down of all these different scenarios and human existence where I'm solving these problems based on this larger overreaching issue...it's essentially that rent that you pay.

Colette: For me it says also that everything I have you have—like we're one.

Lobyn: Yeah, the good and the bad.

Colette: I'm excited. I've actually watched people view your work, it's almost like a walk down memory lane for people, in many ways. But for you, what sort of themes and messages are you conveying with this exhibition in particular?

Lobyn: I think this is a culmination of so many things. Memory is a huge one, just experiences



in Indy, from my first experiences here to being bussed out an hour away from your home and your neighborhood to go integrate at a white school. I ain't been back there since I left. From that to my influences from my parents, to family and friends, and my musical taste, and deejaying. My frustration with certain things in life. My critique of culture, my support of culture, my own contradictions, the films I grew up watching on VHS.

Colette: For the work, it references the American flag pretty specifically. Can you talk about that a bit?

Lobyn: I remember leaving the country for the first time. Ironically to Amsterdam.... I went there for the first time and it was the first time I felt American. Then I understood American privilege while I was there. What it means to be American inside of America and outside of it. And it shifts and molds. I remember growing up and hearing how the Indigenous people, a specific group, would roll with the herd. They would try to use as much of the buffalo as possible. That was one of the early things that I wanted to do. We use the label, the album cover, we use the spine.

Colette: What is your "why" with your art?

Lobyn: Above anything else, the medium really comes from deejaying. Collecting a lot of records and buying a lot of records. Getting a job, getting a car so you can go and buy records.

I had my father's records. I had my grandfather's records. A lot of donations, probably 30,000 records. Deejaying really set up a lot of this. I was in record pools. This was maybe the early 2010s. It was the only thing that I wanted to do. It was my first love and my first failure.

Colette: Your life.

Lobyn: In 38-some-odd years of being based in Indy. My travels, of course, but music and film, I think, are my real go-to creative absorptions. When I have a good day or a bad day I don't say "Let's go check out a Picasso." I listen to music for an hour.

Colette: Does it calm your brain down when you're in this creative state?

Lobyn: I think it gives me something else to concentrate on. People ask sometimes, "Are you listening to Marvin Gaye while you're working on Marvin Gaye?" It's like, "No, it's too much concentration on the thing." So, I think it helps to distract from what I'm doing in order for me to dial into something else.

Colette: The creative part of you.

Lobyn: Exactly.

Colette: Can you talk a bit about the B-SIDE Creative Campus and its mission? I know when I toured it, you feel your energy there, and you feel where you're trying to go.



Lobyn: B-SIDE Creative Campus is a space where we have subsidized, below-market live/work spaces for creatives. It's a two-function mission. We have the real estate aspect, where it has affordability, which I thought was one of the coolest things about the city.

You could buy and have so much for so little that's—slowly—changing and amenities. Lighting is important, and of course music is important to me. Film access, washer and dryer. All of these different amenities. You can live there if you want to. You don't have to. It provides a little bit more than say, "All right, you've got your box. Go make some work." With that is the Creative Care side. Creative Care has to do with what you need professionally and then what you need personally. Those

things that have to do with the person. That's what the campus is about. We have two buildings, two lots, and two homes, and I'd love to have it do other things as we go on, but we just finished our first artist-in-residence and we learned a lot.

Lobyn: I moved back into the neighborhood my parents initially moved to back in '84. They met in Chicago. My father had a job with Sears. He moves down here. They move into the Brookside area. That was in '84. I was born in '85. Then, I moved across the street because my parents got divorced when I was younger. My father actually moved on the other side of the street, five houses down.

Colette: He liked that neighborhood.



Lobyn: I moved back into the Brookside neighborhood because I'm a single father. My son can at least go across the street to see grandpa. That's huge. As you know, if you have children, you need a support system.

Lobyn: From that point, I bought a building and a lot.

Colette: Could you talk about the meaning behind the name B-SIDE?

Lobyn: Yeah. Perfect. Number one: "Brookside." If you take "rook" out, it becomes "B-side." However, for the purposes of music, B-sides are the little deeper cuts and unknown records and

songs, either from artists that you don't know about, or this is an obscure recording from maybe people you do know about.

Colette: Like you just accidentally flip it over and play the other side. [laughs]

Lobyn: You're just like, "Oh my God. This is amazing."

Colette: Outside of that, the one-hit wonders, you have the side one, side two. It's actually side A, side B. When we talked about that, I realized I was thinking about that—you rarely flip your album over on the other side. That side had all the scratches on it, the A-side. The B-side is totally black because you never played that side.

Lobyn: Exactly. You'd never play it.

Colette: The B-side.

Lobyn: I think it's just this B-side, the deeper cuts, the overlooked, it has a certain type of anchoring. I thought that was applicable to my practice.

Colette: You shared stories about your father and his influence on you as an artist. I didn't know that it was 39th and College, the neighborhood. I know you said that your dad would come here [Newfields] and park in the parking lot because he was an artist. Now, he's known as "Lobyn's dad."

I think that's such a fascinating story. If you could enlighten us on his evolution as a street artist and him pouring into you.

Lobyn: Growing up he would do murals in our room. He had this big Pac-Man...probably the size of that wall behind you. It was a yellow Pac-Man eating a blue ghost. We always had posters in our room.

A lot of the work that I began doing was poster art anyway, just on canvas and with a little more 3D effect with the vinyl. I think it was very interesting growing up. I never made a connection to him being an artist. He still doesn't make a connection to him being an artist. We never had any artist talks.

I also saw him do the work that he wanted to do.

Lobyn: We lived across the street from a Church's Chicken and diagonal from a liquor store. It was a pawn shop, liquor store, and Church's Chicken. Then, of course, people would go get alcohol and then sit on that wall. Then, he began.... Number one, he'd go out and sit.

Colette: The wall is a village.

Lobyn: He'd go out there to quiet it down. Then, he started writing on the wall. Eventually, all the OGs were the people that were drinking. They eventually just left. Then, the wall stayed.

I saw him work, time after time, putting whatever he did at the time and the moment. I think the most interesting thing, I say, is that I remember people, when he was working on the wall. They would stop and say to him, "Hey, are you supposed to be working on that wall?"

They didn't even know who did it, but they were protecting it...

Colette: From the artist.

Lobyn: They'd just go, "Hey. Hey, man." It was coveted, but they didn't know who did it. I learned a lot from that, that you didn't have to buy into the narrative of what an artist is. You could do what you wanted, and you didn't need to have anybody else give you approval for that. It could be impactful.

Lobyn: Yeah. Then, on top of that, my father always went to creative spaces.

Colette: He exposed you.

Lobyn: We were able to go to many different places.

There was this idea of knowing that there was other things elsewhere. You accepted the IMA for what it was, especially during that time. The only Black folks I ever saw in here were the security guards. I think it was cool coming here. We'd have picnics out here.

Colette: It was part of your neighborhood. Part of your space.

Lobyn: Yeah. We were always here. Saturday morning, you all used to have story time here. It was open to us because our parents opened it to us. That's generally what I saw earlier on. You work very hard for someone to be called, "Oh, you're such-and-such's son or daughter." I'm very proud of that. He gives me a little shit for that, but I'm always like, "Dad, I've worked very hard to make you my dad... 'Lobyn's dad.'"

Colette: It doesn't happen overnight.

Lobyn: No it does not. [laughs]

Colette: I just love that story.

Colette: We talked about your dad, but we didn't talk about your mom, but you reference her a lot. From the artistic Walter Lobyn Hamilton side, where's your mom in all of that?

Lobyn: It has to do with knowing that you can do better. My dad's out of Civil Rights. You get a job. You stay there. You don't...you ruffle the feathers, but it's very service oriented. As long as you can keep these things and that's fine.

My mother was always about going beyond that a little bit. She was about service. She was about making sure that if you have these ideas, these values or have these dreams or thoughts, that you saw them through, that you relied on a higher power to do so. I didn't subscribe to that, but I understood what she was saying. She always was able to put me in a place where I would travel. She always knew I needed to get out of here. Wherever that was...she always made sure that I was educated. She was a stay-at-home mom and that's the real reason why I've been able to be the person I am.

I remember we were by the Hinkle Fieldhouse, by Butler. The International School used to be School 86. I remember one time, car broke down. She biked me from 38th and College over there...

Colette: Oh my gosh.

Lobyn: To make sure that I didn't miss school. I think there was a field trip that day. That's the type of mother she is. Just so sweet, kindhearted. "How you doing, my love?" She'll talk to me like that. "How you doing, baby?" Just so sweet and vibrant...

Colette: And spiritual.

Lobyn: Yeah. There was a standard. She set a higher standard.

Colette: Lifting you.

Colette: She didn't take barriers. She removed barriers. The car breaks down? That doesn't mean we can't go. We're going to get on this bike.

Lobyn: It was perseverance at that point. It's like, "Yeah, you can have an excuse here. You could." And she's just that spiritual guide. That's my parental unit—in between the earth and the sky.

Colette: You have spoken about locations in Indianapolis that have particular importance to you in your journey as an artist. I think people would be interested in hearing what those places are and why.

Lobyn: The Central Library was great. For me, it was the first time I was able to show my work in the larger capacity of a show.

Colette: That was the beginning of [your dad] becoming "Lobyn's dad."

Lobyn: Yeah, it was.

Lobyn: The ISO was huge. Taking my father to the symphony for the first time. Then, finding out that my grandmother used to be a live-in domestic for the president of the Cleveland Orchestra.

It was this class thing that was going on. That's a very odd thing, being involved in and loving a



particular genre of music and then finding out... He never went to the symphony. You'd think that you're that close to access, but you're...

Colette: You're not.

Lobyn: He even scoffed at me when I said, "You never went?" He said, "No." That's not how it goes.

Colette: It's dumb to even think.

Lobyn: Yeah, exactly. That's not how that goes.

Colette: We can't relate to that.

Lobyn: No. I can relate in a certain way. When he said it, I was like, "Oh, duh."

The ISO is important for that. I didn't know we were crossing a barrier at that point. What does that mean to get to a space you didn't know had such significant importance?

Colette: That's why I'm super excited about this moment for you and this moment for them. It's one for Newfields. It's all dismantling these barriers that are built over time. It's very exciting to me. You don't see yourself doing that, but that's...

Lobyn: Sometimes resistance is interesting because it comes with a specific antecedent that you're reacting to. I don't how much, sometimes, we're in control because it's so reactionary.

I thought, from B-SIDE, to doing my work, to seeing my father do his work, to my mother and her wonderful insight, and wisdom, and faith-led based life of seeing the unseen. Never being taught to...never taught a specific gaze of how to do certain things a specific way.

I'm very thankful for that because I don't need an antecedent for me to do things that happen in a regular, serendipitous way where you get to these spaces and you're like, "Oh, it is that."

Lobyn: What can a creative have besides work? "Maybe we should buy that building." Or, "I like going to the symphony. You want to go?" [laughs] It's just like that sort of stuff. They don't want us there. I need to be there. There are certain people for that. I believe sometimes we get muddled up into one.

Colette: Right. I totally get it. That's the best of life. Everybody finds their own form of activism. Everybody finds their own form of background. You find it in your art and your creativity. We're all not Angela Davis. We're all not Cesar Chavez. We got to find our own form of activism in our own lives. Muhammad Ali called it the rent we pay to be on Earth.

Lobyn: I'll pay it. [laughs]