

Disrupt Yourself Podcast with Whitney Johnson

Episode 73: Harold O'Neal

Whitney: Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast. My name is Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption. My guest today is [Harold O'Neal](#), a Tanzanian born American pianist, film score composer, record producer who has worked with the likes of U2, Jay Z and Disney. Welcome to the show, Harold.

Harold: Thank you so much, Whitney. It's an honor and pleasure to be here with you.

Whitney: I'm so happy to have you here. And, um, it was so fun that y-you and I just, ah, had sort of a happenstance meeting. Um, I, I guess it's been a couple of months ago at, at [Peter Sims'](#), um, Silicon Guild/Black Sheep event and just were able to strike up a conversation. It was so fascinating to talk to you. I'm just thrilled to be able to have our podcast guests learn a little bit more about you.

Harold: Yeah, and, and, you know, sometimes those kind of off the cuff happened, you know, just happen to have the conversation type of conversations are the best. So I'm happy we connected that way.

Whitney: One of the things that really caught my attention, um, when we first started talking is that you love music. You just love it and you love piano in particular. And I'd love to have you share with, um, our audience a little bit about where you grew up, um, how you discovered you love music and how you discovered piano.

Harold: I was born in Arusha, Tanzania, to a Tanzanian mother and American father. Came here when I was about two years old. And, ah, one of my earliest memories of music, I was sit, was sitting with my grandma and my mom watching Tom and Jerry and Disney. And, ah, Tom and Jerry in particular stands out for me because there's not, not much dialogue in Tom and Jerry. Ah, the music told the story. The music was the script. And watching Tom and Jerry was my first real experience of seeing music tell the story. I fell in love.

I didn't start any formal training then, ah, but I just always had the love for music. My dad had a little keyboard around that he would doodle around on. Really just something for fun. He's not a piano player or anything like that. And I would just touch it every now and then. And funny thing about that is that, you know, if anyone ever asked me if I played an instrument at that time, I'd say no. As a kid, I'd say "No, I don't play any instruments." But if they, if a piano was around, ah, and they asked me about the piano, or if it was just around, I'd say, "Well, I already know how to play the piano." And so I, I always had this special connection and bond with the instrument.

Whitney: Oh, that's interesting. So even though you didn't play, there was a f-a feeling for you that you somehow did play?

Harold: Yeah. Yeah, it did not-

Whitney: Huh.

Harold: It never once felt like a stranger to me. It felt fascinating and mysterious, but it never felt like a stranger to me.

Then eventually I, I started, um, I tried other instruments and, you know, I tried the trombone for a while. And I got into gymnastics a bit. I tried a few other things. You know, I tried being a, a cartoonist. I was passionate about drawing. Ah, I started getting into acting in junior high. And, ah, seventh grade I started playing the flute. Ah, one, one of the best things my parents did for me was that they never forced me in any direction. So when I was bouncing around trying different things, they just supported all of it, you know?

And so I tried the flute in seventh grade. Didn't like that. And the piano was lying around there and the band director would kind of just play by ear, accompanying the concert band there. So the piano's not a traditional concert band instrument. And I begged and pleaded with him. I said I ... His name was Mister Jones. I said, "Mister Jones, I don't want to play the flute anymore." He said, "There's no more instruments, Harold. There's nothing else." But I said, "What about the piano?" He said, "Do you know how to play the piano?" And I said, "Oh, I already know how to play the piano."

And he, he gave me a shot and said, "Well, go ahead. See if you can figure out what I'm doing." And he showed it to me and that was my, that's when I first started, I guess, saying that I was a piano player. I started taking lessons in junior high at this, ah, they weren't formal lessons. There was like a little keyboard class for, for the kids. And in high school is when I started my classical training, and then in jazz. Ah, and yeah.

Whitney: Okay, so, ah, so we have to stop for a second 'cause I am like, 'cause I play the piano, so hearing you tell me that you are now 13 years old.

Harold: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: You've never had any training, you show up at concert band and you're like, "Can I play?" And you just figured it out. Like what did you do? I, I mean that's just so ...

Harold: Yeah.

Whitney: That's, I think, for a lot of people that are listening to this, 'cause like a lot of people listening have had, have taken piano lessons. And so the fact that you were just completely just figuring this out, can you just walk us through a little bit of what you did?

Harold: Yeah. So I was, you know what it's like for me with th-that kind of thing when I learn things? It's like so you've seen Ghostbusters, right?

Whitney: Yeah.

Harold: And do you remember when they're on the roof at the end and they're with Gozer the Gozerian. This, ah, I guess, the, the, the main, the final villain at the end of the film.

Whitney: Aha.

Harold: And, and she asks them if they are gods. And I think Ray said n-no. And then she said, "Well, then you'll die." And she, you know, hit them with a, you know, with a, with a blast, right? And, ah, they almost died. And I think Peter looked to them and said, looked to Ray and said, "Ray, if, if a god asks you if you're a god, you say yes."

So my thing was that I would, ah, if so when he said, ah, can you think you can play this, I had no idea how to play it. But I would just say, "Yeah, I can play it. Oh, yeah, sure I could play it. I can figure it out." And having that kind of pressure is what like, I guess, ah, it, it would g- ... So saying yes to that got me in the door. And-

Whitney: Yeah?

Harold: That added pressure of like having to live up to this thing that I said I could do, that I've never done before, would fuel my-

Whitney: Okay. So, alright, we, we have to walk through this, Harold, 'cause I am like mystified. So, could you read music at this point? Yes, you could read music.

Harold: I could not read music. So, yeah.

Whitney: But you were p-

Harold: Yeah.

Whitney: Okay.

Harold: So, he's there, so he's playing ... So he was already playing piano in the band. I told him I could do what he was doing. I really couldn't. I did not know how to read music. So I have, there's this little window from where I said I, I can do it. He doesn't know I can do it and I have like an X amount of time to figure it out.

So I'm literally just watching his hands and figuring it out by sight. I'm a very visual learner, so figuring out by sight what he's doing. And the pressure, the added pressure of me telling him that I can deliver this, that's kind of what got me, that's what gave me the fuel, the do-it fluid to do it.

Whitney: So what was the first piece that you, um, you all played? You were playing for a concert band.

Harold: I don't know.

Whitney: 'Cause, like you said, piano isn't typically a concert band interest, instrument.

Harold: Right, yeah.

Whitney: But what was the first piece that you played?

Harold: Well, so keep in mind this was like a junior high school band, so it wasn't really for high school.

Whitney: Right. Okay. (laughs)

Harold: But, ah, so we were playing, oh, who's the artist that did Conga?

Whitney: Mm.

Harold: Gloria, was it Gloria Estefan?

Whitney: Oh, Gloria Estefan. Yeah, yeah, yeah. It was Gloria Estefan.

Harold: It was. Yeah, so that we were doing that, ah, that song Conga. That song. And there's no real piano part in there, you know? And, ah-

Whitney: So you just start watching him and then just imitating and just kind of figuring it out as you're watching him?

Harold: Yeah, I'm watching him and imitating him and just figuring it out. And so the whole time he was wanting to give me a shot, but he was skeptical.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Harold: But then, at the same time, when he saw me actually do it, ah, he was surprised.

Whitney: Yeah. Alright.

Harold: I was the kind of kid that I was like that with everything. Like, ah, you know, I'd never r-rode a horse. That's my grandma's fault. She would take me around and do things. And so I'd never ridden a horse before. And I said, well, they said, "Can you ride a horse?" And I'd say, "Yeah, sure I can ride a horse." And now I gotta figure out how to ride a horse while I'm riding it.

Whitney: Hm.

Harold: Something about having that, that f-those flames under my feet, that that's like inspiration for me.

Whitney: You just figure it out?

Harold: I just figured it out.

Whitney: So for our listeners, when you hear Harold play the piano, you'll just be like, "Wow. Okay, how did he do this?" And what's so fascinating to me about this is that the learning style, I mean, if you look at from a pedagogical standpoint, the way people learn how to play the piano in our country, it's either learning by sight. Um, secondarily, ah, people are playing by ear. It's highly unusual to learn how to play by watching someone play, so it's like taking rote to the next level. And that's very interesting to me. And so is that how you learned how to do a Rubik's Cube is by watching someone as well?

Harold: Well, for the Rubik's Cube, so the bulk of my learning style when I get past the initial hump, I'm like a cat. What I mean is that I take something and at first I have no idea how to do it. I'm very curious about it but I have no idea how to do it and sometimes like it's very obvious I don't know how to do it.

And I take it and run off by myself to find some open p-plateau. But I'm there by myself and I obsess over it. And then I bring it back and I show it off like, like a cat bringing back a dead mouse.

Whitney: Of which we've had many in our house this summer with our cats.

Harold: Yeah, yeah. And sometimes people are like, "Oh that's interesting. He brought back a dead mouse." And some people are-

Whitney: Mouse or a dead bird.

Harold: Right, right. And some people are freaked out by it. You know, some people are, you know, confused by it, you know? So that's it with the Rubik's Cube. At first, honestly, I had no idea how to do it. Could not figure it out. And what I did was just take the cube for a few weeks to, to the thicket of solitude and just obsess over it. Over and over and over again.

And the first time I did it, it took me about three weeks working on it, hours and hours every day. Took me about three weeks the first time. The second time might've took me 24 hours. But the first time I did it it felt like, you know, lost in a cave and you're trying to get out of this cave. You have no idea where you're going and it starts to make sense. And then you stumble out of the cave into the open, and you're like, "I actually did it. I found my way out." But you can't remember how you got out.

Whitney: Right.

Harold: Yeah. So that's the way it felt.

Whitney: So that was the first time. So the second time you had to figure out how you figured it out.

Harold: Exactly.

Whitney: And then you gradually were able to have a process.

Harold: Yeah, yeah.

Whitney: So would you say that that Rubik's Cube, is that how you figured out how to do the Rubik's Cube is a bit of a metaphor for how you learn generally?

Harold: Yes. Absolutely.

Whitney: Interesting.

Harold: Yeah.

Whitney: Okay, so you go from Professor Jones, please can I do this? You watch him, you figure out how to do Gloria Estefan's Conga. You make something up, you just figure it out. You realize you've got a pretty good ear. How do you go from that? What, what's kind of the next big milestone when Harold figures out, actually, I think I want to be a musician? Can you just talk us a little bit through that chronology?

Harold: I grew up in rough neighborhoods in Kansas City, Missouri. And ah, there were a lot of things about that that there were just beyond my control. That combined with just adolescence, puberty, just typical human stress. And I wanted an escape from that. Music was that.

And even though I couldn't change what was going on in my environment, I did get to decide how much I obsessed over music. And that was an easy access to some form of power and control. So that again-

Whitney: Mm. So it was a lifeline a little bit for you, it sounds like?

Harold: Absolutely, absolutely, absolutely. So-

Whitney: So do you remember ... Okay. so that's interesting. So you did concert band. You, you find, oh, I've got this, there's this haven here. Ah, this whole world that you've discovered and you loved it and you kind of this Rubik's Cube, um, intensity of I'm going to figure something out. Um, do you remember the next piece or kind of the next sort of stepping stone for you in terms of musically? What, what did you figure out next, or what did you do next? Do you remember?

Harold: Yeah.

Whitney: Or something a-around that period of time?

Harold: Yeah. So I'm starting to see that music can be the haven for me, the escape for me. Ah, the place of peace for me. A way out from the things that are beyond my control. So I said I want to keep taking this to the next level. Ah, and that meant becoming a professional musician. And for me to do that, I had to get formal training. So there was a

performing arts school in Kansas City. Ah, I decided to apply. You had to audition. I got into the school and, ah, that's when I started taking classical lessons.

And going back to my grandma and my mom watching, ah, Tom and Jerry with them, ah, there's a song by Franz Liszt, one of the, ah, one of the greatest classical composers. He had, he had a piece called Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2, which was featured in Tom and Jerry, an episode of Tom and Jerry. And that was the song I wanted to learn how to play. Ah, there were many obstacles in, in learning that because it's so hard. And to have that be your first song to learn, well, it's, ah, kind of a, it's an uphill battle. But you know me. I, I liked the challenge. And even-

Whitney: So you're like I'm going to figure out how to play the Hungarian Rhapsody? And for our listeners, we'll make sure we include that so that you can hear it.

Harold: Yeah, and I, and I had a mentor at the time. I had a teacher, and she ... So, thank goodness for her, because most classical, most traditional classical teachers, they would say, "You're not ready for that song, and you are not gonna play it now-

Whitney: Right.

Harold: -You will play it later." And she encouraged-

Whitney: Right.

Harold: Hey, you know, she had the insight to encourage me to just do what you can with it, and the parts that I couldn't figure out, she said, "Well, you know, you've been learning jazz, why don't you throw in some of your jazz chords?" And-

Whitney: Fascinating.

Harold: That was totally not the status quo. That was totally not what you are supposed to do about that.

Whitney: Right.

Harold: Breaking some ... And then check this out: I found out that one of her, uh ... She's ... One of her teachers' teachers, somewhere back there, was actually Franz Liszt.

Whitney: No!

Harold: Yep.

Whitney: So, from the genealogy standpoint, one of her teachers' teachers had studied under Franz Liszt.

Harold: Exactly.

Whitney: Wow!

Harold: Yes, so she was touched some way, somehow, by the insight-

Whitney: Yeah.

Harold: -of having one of those great composers- [crosstalk 00:19:14]

Whitney: So, so, if I understand [crosstalk 00:19:16]

Harold: That's why. That's one of the reasons, you know.

Whitney: Yeah, so she ... So, basically, she's like, "Okay, you can take this on, and ins-, and instead of saying you've to wait until blah, blah, blah," she's like, "Do what you can. The parts that you are, you are technically not ready for, let's just set them aside, or you can improvise, and then you'll come back to them and eventually master it."

So when did you ... How many years did it take you before you had mastered it? Was it three, four years?

Harold: Well, I would say that my version of it ... So this was freshman year of high school, and at the end of the year we had-

Whitney: Yeah.

Harold: -a recital for all of the piano students, and I performed my arrangement of Hungarian Rhapsody No 2 for the school. And uh-

Whitney: Wow! So, Harold, what you are saying is that when you couldn't play it, then you improvised, and you came up with a way to do it. So you turned your constraint into a creation.

Harold: That's right. That's right, and she was a guide and mentor through that entire process.

Whitney: All right, so let's fast-forward-

Harold: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: -to today. Um, tell, uh, share with our audience, what are some of the things that you have done in your career to date that have just been really exciting? Um maybe give us one or two things that are kind of glitzy, that everybody will be like, "Wow! That's super cool, Jay-Z," and then maybe one or two that creatively have been super, just rewarding, and maybe they are one and the same, but I suspect that often times they are different, and just give us a sense of that.

Harold: Well, so there's two big general things that I wanna say about this. So, one is that I have these accolades in music, but then also, I've never quite been able to shake the, uh ... "I've never done this before, I think I'll give it a shot" bug ... So-

Whitney: [laughs].

Harold: So, musically, there's you know, rocking the stage with U2, and being able to perform, uh, for them on an international plat-, perform with them on an international platform for a historic moment. That was just phenomenal. Why?

Whitney: What was it? Was it ...? What was it that you were playing? What was it for?

Harold: We did a televised performance, uh, in Dublin, Ireland for Amnesty International. Aung San Suu Kyi, who was at that time, um, at that time she had been freed from being a prisoner of war for maybe two or three years, and Amnesty International was giving her the Amnesty Award, and Bono was presenting her-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Harold: -with the award, because Bono was presenting the award to her, because he had written some songs for her in the 90s and ended up being banned from the country, or something like that. A lot of stuff went down, and he was involved, so they wanted him to present the award to her, and they wanted ... So, for that to happen, uh, they wanted to assemble a band of the best of the best, and I was called for that. We ended up recording a DVD together, together, of this performance.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Harold: And, uh, the DVD is titled [Electric Burma](#).

Whitney: Wow. So, you got to perform on stage with them for the Amnesty International. So, that, is that a creative highlight, or is that just a highlight?

Harold: It's, it's both.

Whitney: Or is it both?

Whitney: Okay, so it was a creative, it was a creative and kind of, uh, marquee type of highlight.

Harold: That's right. Yeah. Yeah. So there is that, then there is also being featured in Jay Z's music video, um, the name of the song is "[Forever Young](#)." Yeah.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Harold: So, I'm a featured artist in that music video, and that came about from me being a break dancer. So, I saw break dancing and said I wanted to do that, and I ended up becoming this dancer and working professionally as a dancer. It's something I never pursued, but it

just started to show up, and now I'm a member of, uh, one of the most iconic break dance crews, the Dynamic Rockers. They've been around since 1979. Went through this brutal-

Whitney: Wait, so you are not ... So in Jay Z's you are not playing piano? You are dancing?

Harold: Dancing, acting, yeah.

Whitney: How long ago was that?

Harold: This was maybe six years ago.

Whitney: Okay. But you are not focused on dancing and acting now. You are focused primarily on music, or do you, does it just depend?

Harold: It just depends. I mean, all of these things center around music. My connection to music is what-

Whitney: Right.

Harold: -was a great resource in me becoming a dancer. So another-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Harold: Another point like that would be becoming a black belt in the martial arts. So, that's been a lifelong journey.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Harold: So, uh, yeah, but that's not, that's not something glitzy, necessarily. That's more of, like, a personal achievement, a personal accomplishment.

Whitney: Yeah, it's a personal milestone and, and yeah, accomplishment. So-

Harold: Oh and there's also-

Whitney: One of the things that I wanted to-

Harold: Composing for Disney. That was a personal highlight for me, since I was-

Whitney: What did you do?

Harold: Since I worked for, uh, Disney's Tomorrowland. I was brought in towards the end of production. Some last minute things popped up that they needed some scoring for, and yeah. I was called in to do that, and that was great. A lot of fun.

Whitney: So you said something in an interview a few years ago, that said our heartbeat improvises its own rhythm unique to each person. Will you say more about that?

Harold: Sure. So, I believe that everyone is a natural improviser. Uh, whether we, you know ... Improvisation is crucial to our survival, and-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Harold: Improvisation is crucial, crucial to how we develop as a civilization, as humankind, and it's, uh, you know, it's crucial to how we survive. You know, simply put, our heartbeat, uh, is improvised. It's not a set rhythm.

Whitney: That's interesting.

Harold: And we respond.

Whitney: Yeah. It's really interesting.

Harold: It adapts with how we respond and react to what's going on with us. Our breath is the same way too.

Whitney: Um, you said something else I thought was really interesting. Um, we, we started to have a conversation. I would love it if you could share with our audience about, um, music and major and minor chords, and some of the work you are, you do, with organizations around leadership, and could you just share, take a couple of minutes and share what that's like? Just give us a very high level overview, because I thought it was fascinating.

Harold: Sure. So, in my many years of studying music, I've found that in every style of music, uh, the ... Every style of music comes down to five fundamental chord types. No matter what style, no matter what part of the world it's from, they all come down to these five fundamental types of chords. And before these chords had names, they were about describing emotion. They were about describing physical movement. Uh, and I will teach you these chords now.

So, for the first chord, I want you to think of upward-moving energy. Moving up, upward-moving energy. This sound is associated with a positive sound, uh, a happy sound. A happy chord. This chord is called the major chord. [plays chord] For the next chord, I want you to think about downward-moving energy, being grounded, connecting to the earth, uh, stomping your feet on the ground. This chord is known as the dominant chord. [plays chord] For this next chord, I want you to think about energy coming in from every direction, coming into the center, compressed energy. This chord is known as the sad chord. This chord is called the minor chord. [plays chord] For this next chord, I want you think about energy moving outward, in every direction, from the center. Every direction, moving outward from the center: this chord is the chaos chord, and its name is the diminished chord. [plays chord]

And for this last chord, I want you to think about stasis, floating, a dream state. This chord is the floating chord, the dream chord, and it's known as the whole tone chord.
[plays chord]

Now, there's no particular order to those chords. No chord is the better chord. No chord is the wrong chord. No chord is the wrong chord or right chord. Each of these chords are part of a story. For example, you can have a story that starts happy. We start off well, and then we move to a place of sadness, and things aren't working out. And then the story moves back to a happy place. People love this story. This is, uh, [laughs] kind of like the basic template for most stories. Other stories can start in a place of groundedness and then move to a dream state, a floating place, and then move to a, a sad chord, a place of sadness and leave us in despair. And just the act of having that journey is beautiful.

So, I use this, um, I use this model. Even though there's nothing new under the sun, but this is my particular system, uh, of teaching music. Um, and I've been working with John Sviokla, author of [The Billionaire Effect](#) from Pw-, PwC to develop, um, a platform, a thought leadership platform centered around a music experience called The Song of Your Customer, and we are calling this harmonic music template The Five Circles Quest, and we use this to show corporations and companies how to find the voice of their customer. And not only that, but to find that inside of themselves, because every story we tell is a gift, not only to the listener, but it's a gift to the storyteller, because, uh, the listener giving us an opportunity to tell our stories, them being a listener is a gift to us as well.

Last thing I'll say about this-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Harold: -is that all of these chords, we know these chords. We know these sounds, without even having to know them. That's why when you watch Tom and Jerry, and you hear the dream chord, and you see Tom literally go in the air and float on an imaginary bed, that it fits with what you are seeing.

Whitney: What's the uh ... so Tom and Jerry, if you do chords for Tom and Jerry, every episode of Tom and Jerry, right, has a template. What are the chords for Tom of Jerry.

Harold: Yeah, typically, it would start off happy, right? Sort of happy. Tom or Jerry living their ... You would see Jerry living his mouse life.

Whitney: Uh-uh (affirmative).

Harold: And you could think of the episode of Hungarian Rhapsody, uh, the episode that featured the Franz Liszt piece. Tom is a concert pianist.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Harold: And he's giving a solo piano performance, and Jerry has a mouse home inside of the piano. So, we start with having Tom showing his "I am a, uh, sophisticated pianist. This is my life." And then we see Jerry have, Jerry having his mouse life inside of the piano, and, uh, it typically starts with a happy sound. Now, Hungarian Rhapsody itself is a complex song that travels through all of these different chord types.

Whitney: Right.

Harold: But, I mean, as far as the general, like, in general go-to story for Tom and Jerry, they usually start simple and happy-

Whitney: Yep.

Harold: -with major chords. They might show some minor chords here and there, maybe some diminished chords here and there. Uh, then they move to like a dream place, and then you see some cat and mouse play between them with the diminished chords, and then they go to a dominant chord to show some ground and conviction, like of who is gonna take control of the cat and mouse story. Then there might be some dream sequence of them again, right? And then there might be some chaos of them playing back and forth, and then it will resolve to a happy place, to this happy chord.

Whitney: So when you do this with co-, companies and corporations of working with in kind of song of the customer, what's the, what are you trying to figure out? Are you trying to understand what their song is or what are you hoping you'll be able to help them do by-

Harold: Sure.

Whitney: ... by doing this work?

Harold: Yeah, so the first thing I want them to know is that they already know these songs. So I show them the fundamental chord types.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Harold: But I want them to get ... what I want ... I love it when they hear this and they say, "Oh, I do know this sound." They say, "Oh, I do know that chord. But I didn't know the technical name for it, but I know that this compressed feeling, this feeling of sadness, this feeling of isolation, and I know what that chord sounds like. I know what sad music sounds like. I know what this isolated feel ..." So I, I like that aha moment because it make, it makes me think about, you know, if you have ... So I see music as a mirror, I see the piano as a mirror, music as a mirror, meaning what you put into it, it's going to give something back.

So any instrument, piano, for example, if you walk by and touch it, it gives you something back. It reflects what you put into it. And kids can walk by and just, you know, touch and play the piano and explore and they will not hesitate. But you'll find that adults when they walk by the piano for the most part and they touch it, they,

they're hesitant. And they say, "Oh, I'm not a piano player. I don't, oh, I don't know anything, I can't play the piano." And, and I have to work with them (laughs) to say, "No, just go ahead, touch any-, touch anything you want and they're so timid about it." There are exceptions, but for the most part they're very timid.

Whitney: Interesting.

Harold: Yeah, and I found that that's-

Whitney: Interesting.

Harold: ... because kids have not yet learned to be judgmental of the reflection they see in the mirror. So through this exercise, I want them to be o-, I want them to get, I want them to be okay with the reflection they see. I want them to feel like they don't have to be a music snob or aficionado to express themselves musically and creatively. So we do exercises and workshops or when, when I teach them, we teach them these chords and right away we have them compose their own song. We show them how to compose their own song, write their own story, and write their own music that fits with this story. And I play it for them...

Whitney: Interesting. Okay, so basically ... Oh, that's fascinating. So someone will tell you a story about themselves and then you'll, you'll on the spot play chords that, that will correspond with that story?

Harold: Yeah, so they write a story that's maybe three or four sentences long or longer than a pa- ... no, not much longer than a paragraph or so, and I tell them-

Whitney: Right, the high level Tom and Jerry, that's what you said, right? Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Harold: Yeah, yeah, (laughs) and I, and I say to them, "Okay, so now you decide for each sentence what chord goes with, with that sentence, and there's no wrong chord."

Whitney: Right.

Harold: So they might say, "Oh, I woke up this morning and I decided to go to the store to get some groceries." And any one of those five chords they can put there, right?

Whitney: Yeah.

Harold: And they compose their song and compose their story that way. And just a simple meaning, a simple message of them being able to say, "You know what, it's I do get to have permission to connect to music in this way. The veil can be lifted."

Whitney: Got it. And then once ... and, and doing that, how does that help you understand a customer? Is it this idea of you, you recognize this music and so you recognize or understand your customer better than you think you do or where are you trying to take them with that?

Harold: Well, when they have their deeper connection to themselves about how they can interpret their story, when they do that with themselves, it makes them more available to do that with other people. So say, for example, they have a, a client and they ... it'd be good for them to know what chord of the story, what part of the story is their client in right now. So the client might be in a place of chaos-

Whitney: Got it.

Harold: ... and yeah. Sure.

Whitney: Okay, Harold, Harold, let's, let's improvise right now. Let's do this, this will be fun. So I'm going to tell you one of my stories and you as I tell you the story then I want you to tell us what chord we should use. How's that?

Harold: And actually you know what, if I was doing this with you for real, Whitney, you know what I would say? You tell me what chord-

Whitney: Yeah.

Harold: ... is there (laughing).

Whitney: Okay, but for in interest of time of, well, we'll, we'll maybe do it both, we'll do both. Okay, so I graduate from college and I go to New York and I have to get a job. And when I first arrived there, I don't know anybody, it's really terrifying and scary to me because I've never been to in a big city. And there we're driving across the George Washington Bridge and it's terrifying, and how are we going to make money? So I'm thinking, "Let's see, it's not a dominant chord, it's not a major chord, it's maybe a diminished chord because there's a lot of chaos that has to get resolved."

Harold: Well, there is a lot of story there with me. I would say, right, I would say like take that there, right there, uh, there, that's, that's a story right there.

Whitney: Uh-huh (affirmative).

Harold: And I would break that down piece by piece, phrase by phrase. So what was the first one again about-

Whitney: Interesting, interesting. So I graduate from college, ta-dah, major chord, right?

Harold: There you go, okay.

Whitney: Okay, graduate from college, ta-dah, major chord, then we move across the country and we go to New York and we're driving across the George Washington Bridge and we're terrified or I'm terrified to see, uh, to see all these big tall buildings, and at night we heard gunshots from our apartments. So, I would say we've arrived there and-

Harold: Yeah, that might be a dominant chord.

Whitney: ... um, and we go into the-

Harold: Well, maybe, it could be, it could be any one of those-

Whitney: That's a dominant chord?

Harold: ... completely open. And this is the process I'm talking about because comp-, corporations working with the customer, they might assume that-

Whitney: Yeah.

Harold: ... "Oh, they're happy about this or this is a, this is not good that they're in this place of chaos or this ..." But they, it's good for them to practice to have another resource on how they're doing it.

Whitney: Interesting.

Harold: So what would you say then?

Whitney: Right, okay.

Harold: Just the mood.

Whitney: Okay, so that's interesting. So you, you could argue on the one hand it could be a dominant chord because like, "Here I am, I've arrived in New York." And it could also be a diminished chord because it's like, "Here I am, I am terrified, now what do I do? How do I get a job?" So that could be the diminished part of the, the, the story, right?

Harold: Ex-, exactly.

Whitney: So it's, it's okay, that's fascinating. And so helping people think when you're looking at your customer or even thinking about yourself like how are you framing this? Are you framing it as a dominant? This is I've got this or am I framing it as a diminished of like chaos, I don't know what I'm doing? Huh, interesting.

Harold: Yeah, or you could, or you could have it be that you initially phrased it as a dominant chord.

Whitney: Okay, that's super cool.

Harold: And then what is it like from, from ... what is it like to be there and then suddenly transition into a place of chaos?

Whitney: Right, right, and then you probably, at least initially, when you're trying to figure out what you're doing and you don't know what you're doing, there's maybe ... Actually, I don't know that there was much of a minor chord at that point, it's more of diminished of like the chaos and figuring it out. Interesting, interesting. And then you get your first

job and you're kind of like, "I'm not sure what I'm doing." Um, so it's still probably diminished but then once you kind of get your ... maybe once you get your first job, you're like, "Okay, major chord again." Um, and then as you're having the experience and it's fun and exciting and discovering this amazing place, po-, possibly it's the whole tone scale. Maybe not dream state but there is some element of that like-

Harold: Yes.

Whitney: ... realizing of where you are. But I, so I hear what you're saying is there's this whole idea of you can take these five chords and you can take one experience and really improvi- ... or not improvise, but how do you want to frame that experience? Is it exciting, is a not exciting? Is it depressing? Is it wonderful? And, and this idea of music when you're giving people such a powerful way to think about it, it really reinforces or helps people say, "Well, actually, that's not how it felt." Is that right? Is that where you're going with that?

Harold: Yeah, yeah, sure. And that's, you know the point of music.

Whitney: Okay.

Harold: You know, it's, it's a vehicle for us to have a deeper connection with ourselves.

Whitney: Yeah.

Harold: And the same way how it was a resource for me as a kid, you know, to transform my life, you can reframe your story, you can reframe your story. And here's the thing-

Whitney: Yeah.

Harold: ... now none of those chords are the wrong chord, none of those are bad chords, they're all resources.

Whitney: Right.

Harold: And this is teaching us how to say, "You know, even though that was a hard time, the fact that I can see it and identify it as a resource."

Whitney: So what chord would you use for your, um, high school years now?

Harold: Let's see, so first arriving to high school, I, I got into the school - major chord.

Whitney: Yeah.

Harold: And then there's this element of, "Okay, now what," has diminished. And then I have dreams and aspirations, right? So those dreams kind of transition to me out of that chaotic state. But I'm still curious, I'm like, "What's going to happen?" And then I major chord, I meet this new amazing teacher who understands me and gets me. And then she

starts to give me stability, so I'm confident and strong and so here comes the dominant chord. But then, but then there's still chaos in my life -

Whitney: Interesting.

Harold: ... because none of the things I'm in despair about are changing. So here's that element of that chaos but then I have to use this grounded conviction, this sense of conviction and, and strength to get me out of that or least to keep me grounded through that, right? But if it wasn't for that chaos at all, then I wouldn't have had, you know, half the year, I wouldn't have had the yearning and desire to want to make something different. So that chaos...

Whitney: Right.

Harold: Yeah.

Whitney: Because it has to, it begs to be resolved, yeah. Okay, so a couple of final questions, super interesting. Um, who would you like to work with that you haven't worked with?

Harold: Who would I like to work with that I haven't worked with? Dum, bam, bam, bam, bam, let's see. I would like to work with the ... I would (laughs), instead of saying it as a person, I'd say it this way, I'd like work with the Oscars, yeah.

Whitney: Okay, cool. And what would you want to do with them?

Harold: I would like to perform with a solo piano piece during the Oscars for a film that I composed the music for that's, uh, has been nominated for an Oscar.

Whitney: I love it. Is that something that you're like constantly telling yourself? Like that's something, an intention that you have of something you're going to make happen?

Harold: I've put it out in the universe.

Whitney: I love it. Okay, that is the way to dare and dream and do, and do you have a date by when you're going to do this?

Harold: In within the next five years.

Whitney: Okay. All right folks, you heard it here first. Well, maybe not first but you heard it here for the first time. Um, Harold O'Neal, thank you so much for being with us today. Any final comments, um, and where can people find you?

Harold: You can find me at pianocinema.com, you can find me at haroldoneal.com.

Whitney: Thank you so much for having, having ... not having us. Thank you so much for being with us, Harold, it's been an absolute pleasure.

Harold: Yes, and I hope that all of you when you listen to music now, hopefully, you'll be able to say, "Hmm, I know more about this than I thought."

Whitney: Fantastic.

What an interesting music man is Harold O'Neal.

I suppose because I play the piano -- and how I learned to play was so different from how Harold learned to play, I was very taken by his learning style. It's powerful. His 'I know how to do this' is setting an intention on steroids. As in, when someone asks you if you're a God, say yes.

Also, really interesting how he uses chords to build out the arc of a story. We tend to start with story. Now what's the music? It's then in the background. But what if we started with music which goes to how you feel without the burden of words. Now. What's the story-- trusting that the story will reveal itself.

Harold also talked music as a mirror. Which it really is. A few years ago, I did a series of blog posts (which we'll include in the show notes) that listed five songs that were the soundtrack to my childhood, five songs soundtrack to teenage years, etc. When I look at what I listened to, I see myself.

Practical tip:

Whether you are musician or not, are going to play the five chords or not, think about songs that define your life, whether right now, as a child, or somewhere in between. What are those songs? And what do they tell you about you?

Thank you to HippyHippyChick for leaving a podcast review on iTunes. She says -

I just recently discovered the "Disrupt Yourself" podcast with Whitney Johnson and I love it! She is an outstanding interviewer and her guests are the Movers and Shakers in a variety of fields and business disciplines. She's even done a few LIVE coaching episodes - super interesting! Highly recommend.

Thank you so much! I've seen more and more of you sharing on social media about your favorite takeaways and episodes, and really appreciate it. It helps people like HippyHippyChick discover the podcast, along with the ratings and reviews you've been kind enough to leave on iTunes.

Thank you again to Harold O'Neal for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Whitney Jobe, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributors Emilie Davis and Libby Newman, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.