



MIND & LIFE

Mind & Life Podcast Transcript

Grant Jones – Music, Meditation, and Healing

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Opening Quote – Grant Jones (00:04): *There's so much to investigate about how music moves us—how Black music specifically moves us, how it heals us. And it's this force that has existed at the bedrock of American popular culture and has been a clear driving engine for Black resilience, for Black flourishing for centuries. And yet, when you look at the scientific literature about it as a force for healing, it's so thin. Music is pure magic, and I think we haven't even started to really scratch the surface. The sheer underrepresentation of Black musical art forms within clinical research—that, for me, alone sheds light on how deeply under-investigated music is as a healing force. There's just these wide open domains of investigation.*

Intro – Wendy Hasenkamp (00:45): Welcome to Mind & Life. I'm Wendy Hasenkamp. Today I'm speaking with musician, researcher and activist Grant Jones. Grant is currently working on his PhD in clinical psychology at Harvard University, where he's creating contemplative and liberatory tools for underserved populations. He's also the co-founder of The Black Lotus Collective, a meditation community that centers healing for people with historically marginalized identities.

(01:16) I spoke with Grant last spring and in our conversation he shares about his deep love for both music and meditation, and how he's working to synthesize those two modalities for healing. We talk about his collaborations with Esperanza Spalding, Lama Rod Owens, and others, and the music-based contemplative intervention he's developed to help heal race-based anxiety. Grant also does some fascinating research on psychedelics. We get into that too, specifically around blind spots related to our current understanding of the benefits of psychedelics, and how race and ethnicity play into that picture.

(01:57) When I step back from Grant's work, I see a thread of transcendence, of moving beyond the small self. And at the same time holding the identities that we have in this time and place and working within them to address trauma, injustice, and inequity. And through it all, as you'll hear, Grant has a lightness and a joy that shines as its own kind of healing. You can learn more about Grant's work, hear some of his music, and find his intervention in the show notes. Alright, I hope you enjoy this conversation as much as I did. I love what Grant is doing in the world. It's a pleasure to share with you, Grant Jones.

Wendy Hasenkamp (02:40): I'm so happy to be joined today by Grant Jones. Grant, welcome to the show. Thanks for being here.

Grant Jones (02:46): Thank you. Thank you for having me. I'm super excited to be here.

Wendy Hasenkamp (02:49): I'm really curious for you, your path into integrating not only contemplation and research, but also music and activism and all the other things that you do. So however you want to take that, we'd just love to hear a little bit of background.

Grant Jones (03:05): Yeah. We only have an hour, so I'll try to keep it short. *[laughter]* My research is unapologetically personal. I think for me, the desire to blend all those domains just comes from an iterative process of trying to figure out, how do I keep all of the elements of my life that I hold dear? How do I keep contemplative practice close while still trying to navigate this world, and take care of myself and feel joy? And for me, it's led me to research. It's led me to wanting to figure out how do I use music as a vehicle for supporting communities, supporting people who are like me? How do I use these practices that have been so fundamental to make me feel grounded, to make me feel whole, to make me feel safe in this world? Yeah, that exploration has led me to the work that I do now.

Wendy Hasenkamp (03:54): How did you become interested in contemplative practice?

Grant Jones (03:59): Yeah. I think my journey with contemplative practice started very explicitly when I was a wee lad of 18, when I was a freshman at Harvard, first year. And for me, I think being at a place that was so overwhelming, Harvard was so overwhelming to go to for the first time... I was this kid from the inner city of Boston who had gone to private school for a long time, but Harvard was a whole other level of just stress, competition, imposter syndrome.

(04:31) And I got to a place in my work in which I was experiencing so much anxiety that it really became difficult to navigate schoolwork in a way that felt easeful. And so I think for me, it very naturally led me to just have to shut my laptop, put the work down, and just take a few deep breaths. And for me, that process was so immediately powerful that it kind led me down this rabbit hole of realizing that I had this agency over my inner experience. I had the ability to bring myself back into touch with myself. And for me, the implications of even just those few initial breaths of getting grounded really sent me down a path of developing a daily practice of this, and I really haven't been able to stop since. And it's since taken over my life, in the best way.

Wendy Hasenkamp (05:13): And then, a lot of your work focuses on music as well. So when did that come in? Was that always an interest of yours?

Grant Jones (05:20): Yeah, thanks for asking. And music, I would say before anything else is, was, my first spiritual practice. I mean, music was such a core part of what it has meant for me to be alive, to make sense of reality, make sense of the world.

(05:40) I think for me, there's always been a desire to figure out, how do I put music first? And I think in this world, we're given very few models (besides becoming a very famous pop star) around how to keep music central. And so I think for me, again, I've just had to get really creative about what does it mean for me to build a life centered around music at the same time as I navigate capitalism, try to feed myself, try to make a living in the world.

(06:05) I think that's also been another, a core driver for me of, again, rooted in an inherent way, thinking about, okay, if music is a spiritual practice for me, and I know just for so many other Black folks it's the thing that gets us through. It's like, okay, I know this more deeply than I know anything, that this force is such a healing force, it's such a grounding force. You know, I'm in this PhD. I like meditation. One question led to another, thinking about this as a vehicle for healing, for contemplation, and also using the platform that I have within the academy to really rigorously test and investigate that.

Wendy Hasenkamp (06:40): Well, yeah let's jump in a little bit to your work. Do you want to share some of your research around music and mindfulness?

Grant Jones (06:48): Yeah. It would be an honor. Yeah. You also catch me deep in the middle of grant writing season around it. So what I'm describing right now is also coming to be my dissertation, is also going to be the work that I hope to continue to do for as much time as I have on this planet.

(07:03) Throughout the course of my time in graduate school, my work has surrounded developing a music-based mindfulness intervention in the form of an album that combines originally composed music that I've made and also have made with some collaborators, guided meditations that I've also worked with some collaborators to make, and then poetry—all of which centers the Black American experience and is meant to just provide grounding, centering, and also just an understanding that there's folks out there who are just going through similar things to you who are trying to heal, straight up. And this intervention exists with the main aim of trying to reduce race-based anxiety, so anxiety that stems from experiences of racism and discrimination in the Black community.

(07:48) Throughout my time in grad school, like I said, I've been developing it and testing it, and I've just conducted the first two pilot studies, which is really exciting. Some really promising preliminary results from those. So right now, yeah, I'm writing grants to further develop the intervention and test it more rigorously in some randomized controlled trials.

(08:08) That's it at a high level, and there's definitely a lot more details that I would love to share.

Wendy Hasenkamp (08:11): Yeah, yeah. What kinds of outcomes are you looking at?

Grant Jones (08:15): So the main outcome that I'm looking at is race-based anxiety. And in the second pilot test study, I also started to do some preliminary investigations of mechanisms. So there's this album that exists that I made that's ostensibly a music-based mindfulness intervention. So mindfulness is the core driver, but I also needed to do investigations to actually understand that is the case—that it's actually moving mindfulness as a potential mechanism. So I've also investigated its ability to increase mindfulness and self-compassion as well. So race-based anxiety, mindfulness, and self-compassion have been the core domains that I've explored. And also in the future hope to assess its ability to support with racial trauma and other forms of suffering generally.

Wendy Hasenkamp (09:02): And was this being developed in 2020 around the pandemic and when George Floyd was killed?

Grant Jones (09:09): Yes. Yeah, you totally nailed that. I mean, that actually was the time in which a lot of this idea was born. I mean, George Floyd's death and the uprisings were so inextricably linked to my calling into this work and just what it meant for me to try to think about my contribution to wellness for Black folks. And so this work definitely started in earnest around then. And like with many things in research, it's taken and taking years to really see it through and see it into actualization, but have been a lot of exciting developments since then. But yeah, 2020 was such a huge part of my coming to be in this work, for sure.

Wendy Hasenkamp (09:49): Yeah. I want to hear more about the intervention itself and how you kind of blend the music and the mindfulness. So maybe can you share a little about that?

Grant Jones (10:00): So yeah. I go about this in a few different ways. Like I said, I think the first thing for me, just comes from a very personal place. A lot of the music that exists on this intervention has unabashedly served to support me through my own practice, and is kind of my own personal brand of dharma, and my understanding of what does it mean to find presence, find peace, to wish myself wellness, to wish myself happiness? Realizing that my wellness is inextricably tied with everybody else's, particularly the wellness of other Black folks. So the intervention primarily flows from a personal place. That's first and foremost.

(10:40) Second, I also, beyond the personal, feel grateful to be in collaboration with a lot of folks with really special and very deep dharmic and spiritual practice and meditation practices of their own. The meditations on the intervention are drafted and co-written by Lama Rod Owens, who's such a powerful being and such a leader within the meditation world at present. And he also delivered the interventions as well. So he's featured on the offering—which is called *Healing Attempt*, by the way. I don't think I've said its name explicitly, but the intervention and the album is called *Healing Attempt*.

(11:17) So not only has he contributed guided meditations to the intervention, but then he's also reviewed the music that I have on it. I'm just like, "Hey, is this good?" Because obviously I have my own personal practice, but I also, again, I think accountability is super important. Maybe my practice is taking me someplace that really might not resonate with some folks. So definitely, I'm glad to be held accountable.

(11:38) And Lama Rod and I met each other in 2016 and worked together in Boston for a number of years to hold meditation space and community for folks of color. So just also have a really tender and beautiful relationship with him, and so glad to be held in accountability by him. And also, yeah, his presence in this work is just so sacred. So that's number two.

(11:58) Number three, I would say about how I think about infusing meditation into the work is, like I said, with empirics. I think that's the third domain, so actually testing it. Some of the measures that I've tested have been a composite measure of mindfulness and self-compassion so that I have clear empirical backing that the intervention can potentially move those targets. Again, nothing definitive because very small sample sizes that I've used. I've just run these tests with 13 people total, but have a clear preliminary signal of efficacy in that this might work. Which again, hopefully (if any funders are listening [*laughter*]) will open me up to being resourced for more rigorous tests, deeper tests of the intervention.

(12:37) And then fourth, I also ask folks. I'm like, "Hey, is this helpful for you? Does this help you get grounded?" That was also a core part of my work of this research is just asking people, "Do you like this? Would you recommend this to people? Does this help your anxiety? Did this help you get grounded? How can we improve this?" Again, just having that dialogue as well. And again, blessed to say that the preliminary results of some of those open-ended questions have been very affirming with the approach. So that's been another domain as well.

(13:06) And then there's other collaborators who, like I said, who have come with their own personal practices that I also trust a lot, who I'm happy to talk a bit about because that's frankly, an extremely exciting part of this work for me too.

Wendy Hasenkamp (13:16): Absolutely, yeah.

Grant Jones (13:18): So I think the second collaborator that I'll name, because his poetry is currently included in the intervention, his name is Terry Edmonds, and he is just another profound being, a very special man. He was the chief speech writer for President Clinton. So he really has deep expertise with using words to truly shape the entire consciousness of America, which is really special. And he's also a poet, and a lot of his poetry is about belonging, healing, self-arrival within the Black experience. And so he contributed two poems to the intervention. Yeah, and again, just so much tenderness for him and so much appreciation.

(13:59) And then, so the final collaboration we're working on right now is of particular meaningfulness to me just because this is actually a lifelong hero of mine, and has also become a dear mentor as well. So the final collaborator that we are currently in the process of working on a track to be included is Esperanza Spalding, who's a really, really established, renowned musician who again...

Wendy Hasenkamp (14:23): Amazing.

Grant Jones (14:24): Yeah. Who's just a personal hero and is still a mentor in some of this work in some of the early stages and has now become a collaborator. So we're working on a song that's going to be included in the intervention.

(14:34) And to circle back to the question about how we center meditation in this work is—again, we both have our own deep meditation practices. But the beauty of doing this work iteratively is that given that I get feedback from the participants about this work, we can take that feedback, and we took the feedback, and then used it to create this song. So it's directly data-informed based on what has been helpful and what people wanted to address, to further support their meditation practices and anxiety reduction in the past. So again, it feels like a very sacred special thing, and I can't wait for it to be out and to be done.

Wendy Hasenkamp (15:08): Will this be available publicly?

Grant Jones (15:12): Yeah. No, thanks for asking. Again, critical question, something that I've been meaning to say. This intervention is designed specifically to go on music streaming platforms. And so the idea is that it will be released on Spotify. And then we will continue to test Spotify and other music streaming platforms as a form of dissemination of the intervention as well.

(15:34) I'm hoping that I can get enough resourcing to launch this work in earnest on major streaming platforms by next year, because most of the music is done. It's just I'm really working on two last things—the track with Esperanza, and then Lama Rod's going to contribute one final meditation. He's contributed two thus far and then has a third on the way. After those are done, I'm really just trying to get it out because I've been sitting on so much music for so long and I feel ready to share it.

Wendy Hasenkamp (15:57): What a fantastic collaboration. And I love that it's so multifaceted, with music and poetry and meditation instruction, I presume.

Grant Jones (16:08): Yeah, yeah. I think what you're seeing is the result of me really not wanting to compromise, letting any part of my life go. I just love all this stuff so much. I don't want to live a life that's not in touch with music. I don't want to live a life that's not in touch with meditation. I'm helplessly nerdy, clearly, so I can't escape from wanting to do schoolwork.

(16:29) So yeah, I don't know, these things won't let me go, and I don't want to let them go. And so this is also the result of just me being unwilling to yield in some ways. *[laughter]* But having a good time. Sometimes it's obviously stressful. But yeah, I have a lot of gratitude and a lot of appreciation.

Wendy Hasenkamp (16:46): That's great. Such a unique dissertation, I love it. It sounds like such a fun thing to work on.

Grant Jones (16:51): Yeah, no, it's been really cool. Hoping to wrap up the pilot tests. The pilot tests are going to be what the dissertation is. And dissertations at Harvard consists of three (can consist of three) individual studies. I've conducted two of the studies thus far, working on the third pilot test now. So hopefully, yeah, the dissertation will be done soon, and then I can just let this do what it's meant to do.

Wendy Hasenkamp (17:13): And do you anticipate, once it's publicly available, will you try to do any larger scale research, having so many more people possibly being able to benefit from it? Or is it just kind of, put it out and be done?

Grant Jones (17:27): Yeah, no, definitely hoping to do large scale research with it. I think that's the beauty of digital approaches to mental health is that there's just infinite scalability to them. That was also a big draw of the work is I have a draw to making music that's publicly available and also has the added benefit of being able to reach thousands, millions possibly.

(17:46) And also, the exciting thing is there's so much to investigate about how music moves us, how Black music specifically moves us, how it heals us. And it's this force that has existed at the bedrock of American culture, American popular culture, and has been a clear driving engine for Black resilience for centuries, for Black flourishing for centuries. And yet, when you look at the scientific literature, psychological literature about it as a force for healing, it's so thin, if not completely non-existent within some domains of psychology.

(18:18) So yeah, for me, it just feels like there's this wide open plane for exploring and playing and collaborating and making. Yeah, it's very exciting. So, long way of saying yes, I absolutely hope to... and the current plan that I have is to pair the release with an investigation around how music streaming platforms can be used to support Black mental health.

Wendy Hasenkamp (18:41): Awesome. I was going to ask you too, a little bit about what's known about music therapy, or the role of music in healing. And I appreciate that you just brought up that Black music in particular is not studied very much at all in this domain. So what do we know, and maybe where places to expand?

Grant Jones (19:01): Sure, yeah. I want to contextualize my knowledge that because I'm rooted within the field of psychology, there might be a lot that I'm missing about research that's already done. So I don't want to erase any efforts that have been made within [other] domains.

(19:14) And I think simultaneously, from my own work of needing to have a foothold within music medicine... And also really quick back context, technically the field I'm in is music medicine, which relates to prerecorded music being used to support with healing. And music therapy is actually a very specific discipline around folks who are trained within that discipline to directly administer live musical care to other people.

Wendy Hasenkamp (19:35): Oh, okay.

Grant Jones (19:36): Yeah. So that's also a distinction that I've had to come into, because the two are actually quite different. Because again, music therapy, there's a licensure process. That's a whole lineage that I'm actually not tuned into.

Wendy Hasenkamp (19:47): Okay, thanks for clarifying.

Grant Jones (19:48): For sure. Yeah. It's a clarification that I have to re-remind myself all the time. And simultaneously I think what's true across literally all clinical care, which is why, again, even though I'm not firmly within a music medicine program, it's very clear that Black music has been profoundly understudied. And again, in my investigations, in my literature reviews, literature searches, I could find a handful of articles at best that address Black music as a vehicle for healing.

(20:19) And when you look at those articles, what I can really say is that a lot of, at least the "standards of rigor" that get applied within Western psychology—which really does serve as a benchmark for what it means for something to meet the standard of efficacy for care within our current care networks—very few studies, if any, really rise to that "benchmark" that we set. And it's not that there's anything that is inherently good or bad about those benchmarks. It's just that we, within our current cultural context, we set certain parameters around what qualifies something to count as healing versus not. And very few investigations, again, to my knowledge, no investigations have really been rigorously tested at the level, say, that the NIH would require to really have it be validated as an empirically supported mental health intervention.

Wendy Hasenkamp (21:03): Yeah. And I'm guessing, just assuming, is that lack of studying Black music also related to a lack of studying Black populations in which to help?

Grant Jones (21:13): Period.

Wendy Hasenkamp (21:14): Yeah.

Grant Jones (21:15): Period. I mean, it's such a clear result of white supremacy, frankly, just to go straight there. It's another reflection of all the treatment disparities that are talked about all the time.

(21:29) Music and healing, and music and survival within the Black community is one of the clearest elements of our own survival that we know of. I mean, when you think about enslavement, slavery, what got enslaved people through was music, so often. And so you see this massive part of the Black experience not being investigated in any really systematic way, in the same way that you see so many other treatments being investigated. And for me, it really does, it's clearly a result of structural inequity.

Wendy Hasenkamp (22:00): So yeah, your work in itself, just forming this research and this particular intervention, is also a kind of activism, pushing back.

Grant Jones (22:06): I think so. I'm going to borrow a framework from Adrienne Maree Brown, but yeah it feels like a form of pleasure activism. And I'm borrowing the framework, but I think the real truth of it is, I'm just honestly having a really good time. Which I think, pleasure activism at the heart of it is really genuinely having a good time, and how disruptive that is and how unsettling that is. Because when you're having a good time, the amount of energy that flows and the ways in which it actually... "outcomes" and the ways you're measured and the ways that the structures that be use to evaluate and couch and box in—a lot of that falls away.

(22:39) And not to say that... it's not going to mean that I'm not in relationship to those things. Obviously I'm practicing western science, which in some ways paradoxically, is as empirical and measured as it gets. But that is just my truth. That's my truth. That's actually... it turns out that one of the most structured, stringent ways that you can measure things happens to be a way that I experience a lot of freedom. And that's just, again, a paradox that is just true of my experience.

(23:06) And I think everyone has their own paradoxical way of existing within this world, making it through. And mine is just yeah, ultimately just having a good time. And that is a form of activism for me because there's a lot of ways to not be happy in graduate school. And I, not that I've always been happy, I've had some very difficult times, so it's not to say that, but I'm also having a great time. I'm surrounded by people I love. I'm doing work that I love with my whole spirit. That really is a deep form of freedom to me.

(23:31) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (23:31): I appreciate you raising that dichotomy between being embedded in western science, which is... I feel it in my body as a kind of very patriarchal system, so reductionist. And then also bringing in this side that is fully open. And I love that synthesis. I'm just wondering if you want to reflect on your experience in academia, which is also a massive expression of those energies.

Grant Jones (24:34): For sure. I mean, again, how much time do you have, for real? *[laughter]* Because I mean, there's so much to say. I'll start by saying I feel profoundly blessed. That's first and foremost. I do want to start with the blessings, because all the bad stuff, all the forces—patriarchy, supremacy—all the things that motivate so much of this contemplative work, this healing work, I've experienced all of it. You know what I mean?

(24:59) And I think we all do. Actually, regardless, I think that's the thing is actually no matter your identities, we're actually all in relationship with these forces, period. And I think they hurt all of us genuinely, which is again, a conversation and a topic that can come up maybe later on. But long way of saying, just to start us off, yeah, I've encountered a lot of the bad of academia for sure. That has definitely found me.

(25:22) And I also think, again, the reason why I started with blessings is because I can't talk about the bad of my experience without talking about so many of the clear blessings... the blessing that I found in my advisor, Dr. Matthew Nock. I love that man. He's such a special person. He's such a good person. And beyond him being a good person, he's such a profoundly special mentor. Before him, I had literally no interest in going into academia at all. Even though I know that's weird because I'm in a PhD, but I mostly frankly was motivated to do the PhD because I really wanted a clinical license because again, what motivated me to come to PhD was the fact that I was holding healing space in Boston for folks of color, contemplative space, and that was what I was planning to do. And a PhD was one way to really resource that. And I like school, like I said. So for me, the plan was like, do school, learn a bit for sure, but really I was trying to focus on that direct care work.

(26:20) But Matt totally put me on to an entirely new way of relating to my work, to my path. Not from a place of any pressure—he was like, literally, do whatever you want. And he was like, "And I think that this could really work for you. And it could be a way, frankly, to just resource your ideas, your deepest desires. And that really is academia at its best. So check it out if you want. No pressure at all." He really never put any pressure on me. But one thing got to another, and he really showed me that academia

really at its best is a way, for one, for me to do the things that I care about most within a resourced framework. So that's the blessing in the form of my academic advisor in Matthew Nock. I will never, ever not talk about it. It's just such an amazing thing.

(27:05) And then it's also, the academy has also just introduced me to so many special people. I think that's the thing about Harvard. It's such a wildly paradoxical place because it definitely, in this cultural context, it's such a symbol of just so many hierarchical things. Such a clear symbol of so many structural hierarchies that I think, in this current cultural moment we're investigating and looking twice and askance at. And again, I think the thing about Harvard, simultaneously, is I have time and time again, continued to meet some of the most incredible, sacred people that I've ever met in my life. And I also can't look away from that part of my experience.

(27:46) Like, truly chosen family. Some of the members of my program that are just really chosen family to me. I met Esperanza, she was my teacher in my class. Literally, I took a class because I wanted to learn how to write songs, and multiple years later, we're writing a song together, literally writing a song together. It's stuff out of an actual fairytale. For me, it's fairytale-level energy that I got invited into through the academy.

(28:17) I don't know, the dharma for me is about... It's like, okay, yeah, obviously there's all this bad stuff, you can't look away from that either. Again, that's for another podcast. But also, man, the blessings that have come in these past few years of my life have been overwhelming. Overwhelming blessings. And so for me, I do hope navigating the academy, I can emphasize more of the blessings, less of the... hierarchical energy, is what I will say, as gently as I can on this podcast. *[laughter]*

Wendy Hasenkamp (28:48): Yeah. You mentioned your activism work in Boston within the Black community, and just helping people and your interest in healing and original interest in clinical work there. So do you want to share a little bit more about that group and that work?

Grant Jones (29:01): Yeah, for sure. The Black Lotus Collective, wow, that's really the group that has... Yeah, I don't know. I mean, what a sacred, meaningful... All these words are super reductive. Literally when I think about switch points, decision points over the course of my life, The Black Lotus Collective truly has defined my entire life path going forward. It's really that serious of a life development for me.

(29:27) I do want to say the group started when I met collaborator Juliana Santoyo at a meditation retreat in California. And we both happened to be from Boston, and we both just were thinking about love in similar ways, wondering how do we resource ourselves in care into the far future. We were much younger then. I was in my early to mid-20s (I'm 31 now). And we were just thinking about and asking questions in a similar way. And so we got [back] to Boston, got to vibing, and then one thing led to another it was like, "You want to just start a collective right here right now?"

(30:12) And then magically, at the same time that we were on retreat, they introduced *Radical Dharma* to me, because I had never heard about *Radical Dharma*. Which again, spoiler alert, written by Lama Rod, angel Kyodo Williams, Jasmine Syedullah—all about race, meditation, dharma practice. And then at two week stretch that we happened to be there, we didn't even know this at the time, but angel Kyodo Williams happened to be speaking at Green Gulch at the time. And then we got back to Boston, and Lama Rod was speaking two weeks after that. And then, because I don't know, just like a young 20-year-old I was with Juliana, and we were there and we were like, "Hey, we want to start a meditation community." And Lama Rod was like, "So do I. We should talk." Which was great.

(30:53) So then Lama Rod brought folks in that we worked with as well. One thing led to another, and then we were just holding meditation space. And before when we started, just to honor our roots, we were the Radical Dharma Sangha of Boston. So we were explicitly within the Radical Dharma lineage. Since then, we've spun off. Nothing but love with Rod, obviously, we still work together. It's just that we were very clearly just starting to do our own thing, more so. And so it just made sense to call ourselves something different. And then, so now we call ourselves The Black Lotus Collective, and it's been like six years going on seven that we've been holding meditation space. And now we hold monthly sits, we've been doing it on Zoom since the pandemic. And yeah, life-changing.

Wendy Hasenkamp (31:32): That's great. And is that specifically for BIPOC folks?

Grant Jones (31:35): Yeah, it's for BIPOC folks, queer folks, disabled folks. Yeah, really anyone who has an identity that historically hasn't been honored to the depth that it should be.

(31:44) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (31:44): I know some of your more recent work is looking at psychedelics and psychology, and that's having a resurgence of interest in the field and around contemplation as well. So I would love to hear what you've been up to in that space.

Grant Jones (32:22): Yeah, I would love to talk about it. So yeah, psychedelics, it's a huge part of my research program actually. In terms of all the papers that I have published thus far in graduate school, all of them have actually been about psychedelics, so that's a huge part of my research program.

(32:33) So just for some background—at the same time that I was publishing in psychedelic work, I was developing the intervention because I knew that the intervention would take a lot longer to develop and test. And so simultaneously, I was working on publishing in psychedelics because I came across a research pathway that really started to work for me in that domain.

Wendy Hasenkamp (32:50): Yeah. What got you interested in the psychedelic path?

Grant Jones (32:52): Yeah. Psychedelics and meditation for me feel so inextricably intertwined. Just in a formal way, so many of the mechanisms of action of psychedelics and meditation, there's so much overlap just in terms of worldview expansion, being in touch with something larger than yourself, a feeling of rootedness and groundedness, profound world expanding experiences. So much overlap between the dharma path and psychedelics that's increasingly being explored within western science.

(33:22) For me, the two as companion research arms has always felt very natural. And so it's kind of been the thing that's really led me to investigate it. And it's also been something that also just flowed naturally. I love studying them. I think there's immense potential within psychedelics.

(33:39) I also think one of the reasons why I feel grateful to be able to study them is because frankly, I think there's also immense potential for harm. I also think that that's been coming up as well, particularly when we think about how psychedelics are going to be applied to underserved populations. And when we think about what does it mean to implement psychedelic treatments within western medical paradigms, in western scientific paradigms, which we've already just discussed, definitely come with their own... a lot of baggage. A lot of baggage.

(34:06) And so for me, it felt important to research psychedelics and to have a voice within that field, because already, when you think about who's investigating psychedelics, it's a white dominated field, yet again. And I think with that, with that homogeneity comes blind spots and the potential for harm. And so for me, as much potential as psychedelics have, like any technologies, there's potential for harm. And I also want to be able to speak to that and speak to the particular needs that folks of color might have when developing these treatments.

(34:34) To be clear, I'm not anywhere near having a fully fleshed out research program to be able to speak to all of that. But thus far, within graduate school, it's felt nice to be able to start to contribute to the conversation and to tee up future research that I can do within this domain.

Wendy Hasenkamp (34:51): Yeah. Can you share some of the findings that you have found so far around your investigations in psychedelics? And also, I'd love to hear more about some of those blind spots, if you have examples that might play in.

Grant Jones (35:03): Definitely, yeah. I would love to speak to both. I think as a graduate student passionate about psychedelics, but not really knowing how to investigate, I think a question that I sat with for years is, how would I investigate these treatments? Obviously, I can't administer psychedelics within treatment settings at present. So for me, the question that I had to sit with for a long period of time is: How do I investigate these things? How do I even study these?

(35:29) So what happened was I came across a paper by a researcher named Peter Hendricks that was just super inspiring because what it did was, it looked at large epidemiological data sets and looked at the associations that psychedelics share on the population level with various mental health outcomes. And so what he did, he took these really large data sets with like 100,000 people and controlled for a bunch of variables, and started to see, even though it's not in a causal framework, it's a statistical approach to say, even when you control for all these things that could be driving a potential effect, psychedelics, even at the population level, you see a very consistent pattern of them being associated with lowered odds of harmful outcomes.

(36:07) In the case of the Hendricks at al paper, that was it being associated with lowered odds of psychological distress and suicidality. But what that woke up in me is like, "Oh, I could do that right now. If that person took this data, which is publicly available, if this person can do this right now, I can also look at that dataset, ask my own questions and start to contribute to this field in that way."

(36:30) I think what felt special is my advisor helped me to establish a clear analytical approach, a clear analytical framework for investigating these substances that also... The thing with large data sets is since there's so many variables, there's issues that could happen with p-hacking or whatever where you're changing your analytical approach just to get significant results. So we kind of set up this a priori analytical framework. It was like, "Yo, stick to this. If you get a result, good, write it up. If you don't, then you have to just really hold yourself to account with that."

(37:01) So again, he was a really great accountability partner as it went about my investigations. But it just still turned out—the pattern really held across a lot of variables, which is a really profound thing to see. Again, just even at the population level, you're consistently seeing psychedelics—and psychedelics uniquely—conferring lowered odds of various markers of addiction, social impairment related to mental health disorders, criminal arrests, depression, suicidality. My advisor and I have published about all those outcomes just based on that analytical framework alone. And I think what's exciting about it is that it can tee up future causal investigations into those questions.

(37:40) While that's all exciting, I think what has excited me most about the psychedelic investigations is that what I've started to do with that large dataset, which definitely feels like a contribution that I feel really grateful to be able to make, is I've started to investigate how race and ethnicity might moderate some of those associations.

(37:58) So a common thread that I'm going to continue to bring back, which again is sadly unsurprising, but when you look at psychedelic research, similar to meditation research and similar to research about Black music, you're seeing almost no research about people of color. And there's almost no research about, what is the impact of psychedelics on mental health in diverse communities? All the treatment research that's conducted thus far has been with majority white samples, which creates really serious limitations around external validity when you think about applying these treatments to communities of color.

(38:29) So what I've done is, I've taken a lot of the associations that I've looked at thus far in some of the preliminary research that I just told you about, and then I've started to test race and ethnicity as a moderator for some of the associations that I named. So essentially, a fancy way of saying, how does race and ethnicity impact some of the associations that I found? Does it impact at all in a significant way? There's statistical ways to test whether a given demographic variable significantly will change a particular association.

(38:56) And across a few papers now, some of which are under review, some of which are actually out and published, I've demonstrated not only does race and ethnicity indeed significantly impact the associations that psychedelics share with mental health outcomes, but when you look specifically by race and ethnicity, you see a very consistent pattern in which for racial and ethnic minorities, the associations that psychedelics share with harmful mental health outcomes is fewer and weaker. And so what you're actually seeing is that most of the effect is driven by the white people in the sample.

Wendy Hasenkamp (39:28): Oh, interesting.

Grant Jones (39:28): Yeah, why that's super interesting is because, again, it really follows the exact same pattern that treatment research is following now, where we have this treatment research saying, okay, psychedelics impact mental health positively for people. And we have these clinical trials that show hey, psychedelics are great. And it's not to knock those trials, but it is just to say (and again, my research is done within a correlational context, so I can't make causal claims), but it does raise similar questions around if you aren't looking at these associations for communities of color, what are the blind spots? Do these effects hold when you actually look at them within diverse populations? Because when you do that with the correlational research, they don't hold a lot of the time. So that's actually the question that I've started to ask, that I hope that clinical researchers a little bit farther along in their journey can start to ask some of those questions as well, because I think they're important.

Wendy Hasenkamp (40:18): Yeah, that's really interesting. So yeah, just to clarify—because we were talking a lot about associations and causality and things, so just in case listeners aren't familiar. So is what you're saying that these large datasets, which have mostly been done in white populations, have overall found these associations between psychedelic use and less risk of these negative outcomes. But when you look at people of color within that sample, those associations necessarily aren't there?

Grant Jones (40:49): That's exactly right.

Wendy Hasenkamp (40:50): Yeah, as you mentioned, you can't say that the psychedelics are causing the benefit per se, but if they are, that might not be happening in communities of color, based on this data. So that has really significant implications for clinical practice.

Grant Jones (41:08): I think so too, yeah. And that's exactly right. So pretty much just for me to re-explain it, I looked at a large dataset. It's not a treatment dataset, it's just people existing in the world. I demonstrated that psychedelics are linked to lowered odds of various bad things like depression, anxiety, et cetera. That's for the overall sample. But then when you start to really stratify and look specifically by race and ethnicity, the associations don't always hold when you look at that for communities of color. Which like you said, if that pattern applies to treatment research, then a lot of the findings that we've had thus far within psychedelic trials might not apply to communities of color, which has really important implications, particularly given the fervor and the excitement around psychedelics right now. It's such a hot field, and a lot of folks are saying, "These are the most amazing things ever," which again, I think just has to be held with a lot of caution and just with a critical eye.

Wendy Hasenkamp (41:59): Yeah. That's really interesting. And you mentioned that that dataset wasn't treatment, so it was just people self-reporting, I assume, whether or not they had used psychedelics.

Grant Jones (42:07): Yep, exactly.

Wendy Hasenkamp (42:09): That also raises for me just, and I'm totally just spitballing here, but I think that a lot of the work around psychedelics relates to people's trauma and the ways that psychedelics can help people approach their trauma, and deal with their trauma. And it's done currently, in the United States, in very controlled settings. As you said, you can't just administer these to people. It's like clinicians have to be trained and kind of help people along their journeys and things like that. So it'd be so interesting to see in a clinical setting, if with appropriate contextualization and holding of trauma, whether it could be... Like, if it's just a population sample, there's different levels or different types of trauma that communities of color would have than white communities. Which, in the absence of any clinical context, may not have been held. So it's just interesting to think about.

Grant Jones (43:08): That's exactly right. Yeah. I totally feel what you're saying. Just to reflect some of that back and also discuss, in my research at least thus far how I've talked about it. One of the things psychedelics definitely have been used for is to address trauma. It's been used, I think generally also just to address various forms of what we call psychopathology, so depressed mood states, depression, severe anxiety.

(43:33) Within the population-based data that I analyzed, people are just generally reporting their health. So it's not like people are reporting, "Hey, I did psychedelics and I have this thing happen to me." It's just you're getting hundreds of thousands of people who are just providing their health data generally. And so it's looking at really large scale associations between who's taking these substances and what they're linked to when you look at a bunch of people who are just reporting various demographic factors and substance use profiles, based on them living their lives.

(44:02) But something that I think you mentioned about what might be happening with people of color and psychedelics, I think kind of gets to the crux of what I'm interested in in this work is, communities of color absolutely have specific forms of trauma that I do think with the right holding context could absolutely be healed and supported by psychedelic substances. And when you look at indigenous communities—and we have to acknowledge that so many plant-based medicines have millennia long

lineages within Indigenous communities for healing, for spiritual practice. In many Indigenous communities around the world, that is a true fact for.

[\(44:37\)](#) Simultaneously though, I think there's also kind of a concept that exists within psychedelics that's this term "set and setting," which is the mindset that you head into a psychedelic experience with, as well as setting in which you do psychedelics radically changes the impact of the psychedelic substance. And when you think about folks of color doing psychedelics within the American context in a non-held environment, there's a lot of trauma just in the air within America, being person of color. And also these substances are extremely illegal, extremely illegal still, even though within the medical context, they have some immunity. But doing these substances as a lay person on the street opened you up to massive danger from the state, massive opportunity to be harmed and to have your life destroyed in very clear ways. And particularly in the Black community, millions of people's lives have been destroyed because of the ways that the state has reacted to their substance use.

[\(45:32\)](#) And so for me, when I've been hypothesizing about why I'm not seeing some of the associations between psychedelics and lowered odds of bad outcomes within communities of color, I think about that fact—the fact that communities of color doing these substances in the unheld American context, actually could be maybe stoking some of this harm, could be stoking some of the less positive elements of the psychedelic experience. Again, I don't have data to support that, but it definitely has, at least led me to the point of wanting to ask the question. I definitely hope to investigate it in future research.

[\(46:06\)](#) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(46:06\)](#): I am curious if you see parallels... You mentioned parallels between psychedelics and meditation and contemplative practice in the sense of world opening or moving beyond the self. I'm wondering if you see parallels also with music, your other work. Is there a similar action there?

Grant Jones [\(46:47\)](#): Yeah, no, that's exactly right. I think before I even knew what a contemplative practice was, before I even had that language, music just was that. It's just such a self-evident form of transcendence, of healing, of understanding. And I think that that is just music kind of inherently. It's such a mysterious force that we as humans get to interact with. We get to make notes and have them translate a certain form of meaning that somehow transcends all language, all culture, all time, just as a part of the human experience. It's actually, when you really unpack that, it's like, "Oh, it's pure magic."

[\(47:25\)](#) It really is. Music is pure magic, and I think we haven't even started to really... Even though there's again, a lot of lineages, scientific lineages that have investigated music in very serious ways for healing, I also simultaneously don't think that we've scratched the surface because again, when you think about the sheer underrepresentation of Black musical art forms within clinical research, that for me alone, sheds light on how deeply under-investigated music is as a healing force. And that's just the Black community. It's not even all the rest of the communities of color that within Western scientific research haven't been given their time to really investigate these as treatments.

[\(47:59\)](#) So yeah. When you really start to see, there's just these wide open domains of investigation that I think exist there. So for pure magic, again, pure magic.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(48:10\)](#): Yeah. I love it. I'm just curious, in the realm of all of these forms that you have been immersed in—music and contemplation and psychedelic work—and to the extent that they all kind of move us outside of a small self or a restricted self, which is such a huge part of meditation and

those paths, I'm wondering how you hold that and that trajectory of moving beyond the self also with the role of identity and the importance of identity for you as a person?

Grant Jones (48:44): Whoa, these questions, these questions. What a beautiful, what a profound question. I think I approach this question in the same way that I approach a lot of... How I approach my work is to not try to be too serious about it.

[\(49:02\)](#) I think earlier on in my meditation practice, I think a lot of people go through this where it's like, "I have to learn the forms and I have to sit, and I have to sit for 30 minutes. And if I sit for 30 minutes, then that's how I will transcend my ego. Once I've transcended my ego, then I will be able to understand the relationship between identity and structure and also non-structure. I can really sit in that non-dual space."

[\(49:23\)](#) And I think as I have gone throughout my meditation practice, I've really, again, A, started to see how personal it is. B, for me, the paradox of my practice, which I will say has a certain amount of depth at this point being at least a decade. (And some people are multiple decades. I at least have a little bit over a decade of practice.) I think something has started to happen to me where it's like, oh, actually I get to not be so serious about this. You know what I mean?

[\(49:50\)](#) I get to be ... Again, going back to beginner's mind, I get to just investigate. I get to make it empirical for me. I get to test it out and try it. And maybe something that I do will not work. Maybe I'll make a song. Maybe I make this intervention. Didn't know if it would resonate or not. Maybe I thought that in centering identity as a form of inviting people to go beyond there. So maybe I would play this intervention to folks and people would be like, "I hate it. Start over."

[\(50:16\)](#) It's true. I really was going on blind faith. I was, again, going on the blind faith of just like, "I love this. It makes me feel like I've transcended my small self. Maybe it will for other people. I hope it does." I have a certain depth of the practice at this point. I have people who definitely have more practice. Like Lama Rod, he did that whole three year situation. So he definitely knows at least a little bit more than me. So if I don't know, then he definitely knows something. So I ran it by him. I asked him. Again, blessed musical mentor, Esperanza Spalding. She has multiple... Randomly has thousands of lifetimes of musical experience and is in her late 30s. I don't get that.

[\(50:54\)](#) Again, reality doesn't really make sense, and I think that's another thing. So just if it makes sense to me, I think I just reasonably ask the question for people that definitely have more experience than me, and they're like, "That sounds about right." And then I go ask the people for whom I'm trying to do the thing for. They're like, "Hey, that actually, that worked out great." And I was like, "Okay, cool." So that for me is science in a nutshell.

[\(51:13\)](#) I think that's the thing also about hierarchy that we talked about. Hierarchy has a way of making things so unfun and so unnecessarily serious. And again, I do think what needs to be serious is not harming people. When people are telling you that they're being harmed, take that seriously. Okay, that's really something to really sit with and be with. That I take seriously. But also, I feel like if you're taking having a good time seriously, you ask these questions in earnest.

[\(51:39\)](#) To be clear, I obviously did want... I'm not going to pretend like I didn't want a certain outcome. It would've been really sad to work on this for years and then be like, "I hate it." That would've been really sad. But also that would've been okay. You know what I mean? It would've been okay.

(51:51) So I think just remembering that I get to be curious, I get to take it one building block at a time. That for me, like we talked about in terms of what are the limitations of western science, but what is the invitation? I think that for me really is the gift of western science that I found for me is, it's a way to document my process and just ask questions with the language that does have sway in our culture. That also just happens to be something that is what it is. We happen to live in a time in which western science is taken really seriously. So I get to be curious. I get to ask questions. I get to do it with a language that also has currency. And that for me is how I do it, just one step at a time.

Wendy Hasenkamp (52:29): That's awesome. Do you have anything that we haven't touched on as we're closing that you wanted to share, or take home messages?

Grant Jones (52:36): No, just thank you for this opportunity. I'm just grateful. Hope to continue just doing what I'm doing, honestly. Yeah, just grateful for all the people who supported me to this point in my journey, and so I feel so blessed and I just hope to be able to continue to have a good time, make music, spend time loving people I love. That's it for me. Let's call it a day. Yeah.

Wendy Hasenkamp (53:02): Well, I love the way that you are synthesizing all these interests and the way that you show up. It does propagate healing in the world, and yeah, I really appreciate you.

Grant Jones (53:14): Thank you. I'm very grateful. I appreciate you too. No, thank you so much for this opportunity.

Wendy Hasenkamp (53:18): Thank you for taking time to chat with us today and be on the show.

Grant Jones (53:21): Absolutely. Blessings.

Outro – Wendy Hasenkamp (53:28): *This episode was edited and produced by me and Phil Walker, and music on the show is from Blue Dot Sessions and Universal. Show notes and resources for this and other episodes can be found at podcast.mindandlife.org. If you enjoyed this episode, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts, and share it with a friend. And if something in this conversation sparked insight for you, let us know. You can send an email or voice memo to podcast@mindandlife.org.*

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