

TRANSCRIPTION | E03 | ARTISTIC ROOTS PODCAST

Cheyenne Kibblewhite | Culture & Working Conditions for Artists

MC = Mel Charlot | CK = Cheyenne Kibblewhite

MC: Welcome everybody! So good to have you guys with us today. I have Cheyenne Kibblewhite ([@cheymami](#)) with us today on Artistic Roots. She is California-based. She is a CEO at Legacy Entertainment Group LLC. ([@legacyentgroup](#)) She is the manager of really great artists that we are familiar with, like Keoni and Mari Madrid ([@Keonemadrid](#) [@_MariMadrid](#)), Melvin Timtim ([@Melvintim2](#)), Bailey Sok ([@baileysok](#)), Scott Forsyth ([@scott4syth](#)), Isidro Rafael ([@isidorrafael](#)), just to name a few. Nothing but great things that we've heard from her and her work. She's also a World of Dance head judge, and she is the executive producer of BB360 ([@buildingblock_](#)), which is a holistic approach to an online and in-person dance training created by Keoni and Mari. Thank you for being with us today. We get to talk today about culture and working conditions for artists, which is always a tough subject, but a very important and needed one. There's been a lot of changes in the industry and a lot of things that still haven't changed, and it's always good to have a perspective from someone that's on the other side, but that also understands our world very well. I'm excited to start with that with you. Thinking of Artistic Roots to break the ice. Can you share with us what your artistic roots are?

CK: I began dancing myself when I was two years old, you know, the expected trajectory. My favourite story to tell is that I got kicked out of my first dance class because I was climbing the curtains, so that didn't work out too well. But I danced all of my life pretty much recreationally until I was 18, and then I started dancing for a small company up in Northern California. I moved down to Southern California, and I was dancing for a company down here where I currently am in San Diego. I always loved dancing. Absolutely loved it. And the administrative side was very interesting to me as well, so I constantly found myself offering to help in other areas and other avenues. We worked with SeaWorld Orlando and I've done Legoland and all the different theme parks. And I was doing the bids for those and then I was producing small master classes and smaller events. And once I transitioned out of there, some dancers had reached out to me and asked me if I would manage them, to which I pretty much said no. It was definitely nothing that I had expected or anticipated or even really thought of doing. But I mean, God clearly had other plans for me because of what I do now. I have never been more confident that I was doing the work that I am supposed to be doing than I am now. It's also kind of scary because to be quite honest, I'm a human being and I want to carry out his will to the best of my ability. It is a lot of pressure, and I'm a perfectionist. I truly care about people, and I do not call them clients at all. I don't I that wall.

MC: I've heard your name so many times and it never feels like "Oh it's my manager." It feels like you are part of the family when they're talking about you.

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CK: We definitely feel the same way. Everyone in our company, we refer to the artists as our humans, and we're very careful. I think that wording is important. I think that respecting people and meeting people where they're at is incredibly important. So as a manager, yes, when I introduce myself to someone, I consider a client who is someone I don't know, who wants to hire one of our humans who will be working contractually with. That's what I use the word client. That's when I will share with them. But when we speak about what we do within Legacy Entertainment, we say the artists who we are blessed to support, because it's really what it is. It's a collaboration. It's a support, it's removing the administrative and the logistics so that the creative can create as they're supposed to.

MC: Thank you for saying that. In other conversations I've had on the episodes, everybody comes back to the idea of wanting to be so good internally of where you need to be, in line with where you think you need to be. And also, if your faith is like that, where God wants you to be so that you're fulfilling his purpose so that you're in line with what you need to do and then you're helping others as you do it, which is literally a thousand percent of what I'm about. So when I hear that from someone else, it makes me feel like I'm not crazy and it makes me feel like "OK, great. There's a lot of us that are also working in that same atmosphere." But then also, especially the connection between you and your humans, that is something that as dancers and artists in general, I've heard a lot. And between us, you feel like your manager, or your agent is not treating you in the way of like it's a collaboration and that's what it should be. And I feel like it needs to be a relationship that you build. It's supposed to be something where this happens, like the fusion together happens and works, and sometimes it doesn't. And that's OK. And then you know that you need to find somebody else. Right? But that's super important, and it's so great to hear it from a manager's point of view. And then with all of that, I love that you're sharing how you started and where you're at now. Do you have any advice for artists that are looking to transition into a world where they want to help other artists from a different point of view?

CK: I don't know if it would be advice or maybe more of an awareness. What we do at Legacy, it is definitely 99% in the shadows. There are so many times when people don't even know that we are part of a project, I'm sure people know that we exist because of the level of our artists if you will, but it truly is an act of service. And anybody who has a desire to be in this position to do this line of work, from my experience, from my perspective, how I believe the job is done right, you have to be OK with not being in the spotlight, with serving others from the shadows, with being behind the curtain. And I share that because when we're specifically talking about transitioning from performer to artist support. I mean, you're literally taking us off the stage. That light is no longer on me, but I'm holding it to help shining brightly on someone else. And there's value in that, but it is definitely a different feeling.

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MC: I love that you said there's value in that because that's also a beautiful purpose and a needed one. And especially if I tie it to certain things that have been happening in the last year and a half, that's what we need. Even as a black community, for example, from different people, to just be able to lift our voices up and be OK that it's not about them, you know what I mean? That's just one example, but you can find that in so many different areas in life where you have to be OK with just helping somebody and not asking to be a part of it, or that you even know that I'm a part of it. Still, staying on the topic of culture and working conditions for artists, what do you think of the working conditions in 2021?

CK: At the end of the day, it's whatever you shape it to be. Things are still just really crazy. There are things that I align with, things that I don't align with. I feel like there is on our end more of a need to be proactive, even more so than we were before, to make sure that any work that we are doing is going to meet our needs, that they are willing to do what needs to be done. And now, with this added layer of expectation, of precaution, of awareness, we have to be that much more ahead of the game. But at the end of the day, as individuals, as artists, as managers, we have the power to shape our working conditions. I believe that they're going to be what you make them. Now that may be that there is a job or a show or an event that is not going to align with our needs. Well, then we need to decide if we want to be a part of that or not.

If the working conditions aren't whether that's from awareness, respect, inclusion, monetary, anything. If it's not meeting our needs, then we have the power to choose to be a part of it or not. So yes, I could sit here and say, "Oh, these working conditions are difficult and things are challenging right now." And let's be real, they are. There's a huge level of uncertainty with any amount of work that's been done. Are people going to buy tickets? Are people going to come? Are they going to be apart? Are they ready to be in person or are they not ready in person? When you have very different beliefs on very different things and you're trying to work to have all that come together, there is a lot going on right now. But we can choose to be a part of it if it meets our needs or doesn't meet our needs and I there's a lot of power in that, it's scary because maybe I'm saying no to a job that would be lucrative but doesn't align with who we are, what we need to do or how our artists are going to be taken care of. Well, you best bet, I'm going to put both heels in the ground and say, "We need to do this or I think it's better if we aren't a part of the project."

MC: And that's so hard. That's such it's a tough situation to be in, especially for when I think about new dancers or choreographers, like being able to get an opportunity of a big flashy name artist. This is going to boost your credit and it's going to boost your resume again, this is going to open doors for you, but you get either not paid anything or barely paid anything, get promised exposure, even though you don't know what that is right now, because we could get that on our own. But it's so hard for young artists now or new ones coming up to say no to things like that. Do you have advice for them or a word of encouragement of what to do to trust the process?

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CK: You have to be confident in your value. You have to believe in yourself. Now that being said, there are forms of compensation that are not monetary that have great value. So it's not always about the dollars at the end of the day. There's, of course, the monetary, there's the experience, there's been a part of something that aligns with you as a human being. There are so many different ways that you can be compensated. But you have to know your value. You have to be confident in who you are and what you are worth. Because if something comes along and it's just, "Oh, I could really work with so-and-so." But then all these other things aren't aligning, and you get in a situation where, I mean, cognitive dissonance is real. But if your energy is telling you no, if your spirit is telling you no, if it isn't what it should be, wouldn't it be better to have the right job rather than the right not job?

MC: With everything we were just saying, I want to know your point of view on the changes that have happened in the dance industry since you entered it. What changes (negative and positive) have you seen in the dance industry since you were a dancer? I feel like it'll still link in from the manager point of view. You've you danced yourself, you've seen a lot even before becoming a manager.

CK: I started dancing so long ago, there wasn't Instagram, if you didn't have an agent, you really didn't have an opportunity. It was almost like, "Who's your agent? If you don't have an agent, you're not worth looking at." Body image was huge. I'm five feet tall. I'm Puerto Rican, which means my hips and my thighs are proudly as wide as my shoulders. It wasn't OK to be anything other than the skinniest. Being Puerto Rican, having thick thighs, big chest or being a beautiful black woman, those curves, if they were too curvy, weren't good. And that's and that's how it was a long time ago. I mean, if you look at the people, I wasn't dancing in the 80s, but if you look at those videos back then, if you didn't look like this, it was equated to your talent. I auditioned for so many things and I would be told, "Well, I know you can't change your height, but I'd like to see you dance in heels and you could slim down a bit." I was tiny, but I was curvy. Being that short and being that curvy, if you were to put a T-shirt on me, I look like a box. I was never somebody who was going to be comfortable dancing half naked. That for me isn't what sexy. Power is sexy. Strength is sexy. I remember not too long ago, it was probably in the last 10 years, seeing Allison Claire ([@allisonclaire42](#)), who's one of Tricia Miranda ([@triciamiranda](#)) dancers or who was. She's amazing. Trish used to come down and teach for me a lot, and she would always bring her. And I mean, just a monster, just literally a force in her own right. And I remember seeing her get Janet. And I cried. We all did because that was the first moment when someone said talent over all of it. I'm going to see the artist within that dancer before I'm going to see her height, her weight, her shoe size, her skin colour, anything. And you best bet that we were screaming our heads off watching her perform. She was where she belonged. She earned it. It wasn't handed to her. She deserved it. And I remember thinking, "Why, why did it take this long?" That was a very, very powerful moment for me. That was a moment where I said, "Good, somebody is waking up".

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CK: And you see a lot more of that now where there's "We want to see how you dance, before we care so much about how you look." But that wasn't something that was common when I was dancing. Also, tangibility has changed immensely, and this goes back to what I said. If you didn't have an agent, you really didn't have an opportunity. Now you can go, "I want to hire a dancer and I'm Coca-Cola, whatever. Let me go ahead and go on Instagram. And I'm just going to scroll through here and look at these hashtags." It went from "Do you have an agent, who's your agent?" cattle call, direct bookings, closed auditions. That's insanity. And I think that social media has been a huge game changer. You can get reached out to by so many people directly. They don't have to ask for your manager. They don't have to try and find you through an agency. Melvin Timtim is a perfect example. He's never had an agent. We've been managing him for five years. You see all the work he's done, so we've been very successful with him. And we do have a few artists who do also have agents, but the majority of our artists don't.

MC: Can you touch on that because that's definitely something I wanted to talk about. What's the difference of having only a manager or having only an agent or having both, because I know a lot of people who also have both. Is there something you suggest?

CK: I think everybody has different needs. I really do. "Do I need an agent? Do I need a manager?" Again, this is my experience. This is my thought. You may talk to somebody else could say she doesn't know what the heck she's talking about. If you are somebody who is going to benefit from a widely cast net, then I think you would benefit from a widely casting network. When there's a producer who wakes up and says, "You know what? We have the show going on and I've seen X work and I want X to direct, to choreograph, to produce." That could be an agent. But when do you need a manager? I think a manager is important. When? The pie, first of all, is going to be big enough to slice. Because if it's something that you could do on your own, one of my favourite things to tell people I say you don't want to pay somebody for cleaning your own toilet. But when it's time to kind of go through the opportunity and the offers and knowing how to leverage it, knowing how to shape the work, when it's no longer cut and dry and simple, "I am teaching a class. I get paid X\$ per class." But now we're looking at things like brand ambassadorship, I potentially could be working with this company, or this offer came in. And you need somebody who can advocate for you. It's so easy for me to say, 'Mel, come on. It's an hour of your time.' But it's their time. And it is the past 10 or 12 years that they have done this and the experience and their unique creative that allows them to be who they are. So if you want to pay for that past over a decade of time, we can go that route. But if you want to pay for this one hour, that hour is a result of that time. So when you say it's time. It's foundational time.

MC: Ladies and gentlemen, I hope everybody listening right now is understanding these gems that are dropping.

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CK: But at the same time, it puts you in a position. If I say to you, “Oh, come on Mel, it’s an hour of your time.” Do you really want to have to respectfully and politely, always, because that’s the only way I will approach work? Do you really want to have to advocate for yourself and sit there and stand up? Excuse me, but not just as a human. Oh, but you’re a woman and you’re a black woman. So now you have to stand up there and stand up for yourself in all of these ways. Take it away. Let somebody else do it. And when that kind of stuff comes into play, when the workload is such that, having other eyes in it is going to be beneficial. There are things where what has come in as one opportunity has exited out the door as something completely different because as we were discussing with the person who is interested in working with one of our humans as we’re discussing this, I’m hearing what the initial ask was, but I’m thinking, you know what? I’d don’t think that’s what you’re asking for. I think we should look at this. And what turned out, as we should maybe do a little videoclip turned out to were on tour with somebody. Shaping things differently. If you are still striving to be discovered, if you are still striving to establish yourself, if somebody doesn’t know that person, even though person X is who they need, an agency can be very beneficial because they’re going to get that “anyone who fits the following things, boom, widely cast network, pull in all two hundred and fifty of them. Huge brands over here, if they don’t know exactly who they want, but they want something that fits these parameters, they’re not going to call Legacy Entertainment, who is a boutique management company for twenty-five artists. They’re going to say, who has a thousand people that we can take a peek at and see who we want. But when a big company says, “I know I want this person and that person is well known and established, they there are people that will call me directly.” Over the years, as we’ve established relationships with people and they know our work ethic, the work ethic of artists, there is a bit of that big brand calling and saying, “Hey, we worked with you two years ago. Our experience was incredible. We have another project not quite sure who we need, but we want to work with your artists because of their calibre.” You know, we do that as well. But if it’s really just general and I would really benefit from a widely cast net, I think the agencies are key when it comes to that. When it comes to “This work is more than just the artist really desires to sift through can sift through when advocating for yourself, as is not comfortable or shouldn’t be on your plate.” When you know having somebody that can look at opportunity and say, “Hey, I think we do need to talk to these people. I think we can pass here.” That’s really where I think that our management services are very valuable. We are insanely hands-on. I will be leaving in a week to go back to New York to go see Keone and Mari. Melvin’s currently in Santa Domingo. I talked to him yesterday. I know their flight numbers. I know their allergies. I know what they do and what they don’t like. I know their airline preferences. I can tell you their mileage numbers off the top of my head. We are so deeply involved in detail there, it really makes it a lot easier on the artist, and that is why we are here we are. So that the artist can do the art, they can create, and we can make sure that everything else is as it should be.

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MC: There are a lot of things that you said that I discovered in only the recent years of the difference between having an agency and a manager or even choosing to have both. And I just got really excited because I'm thinking of the younger generation and listening to you right now and having the opportunity to hear directly from you and your experience of what it is and what they can aspire to as well, because that's what it feels like as well as you're talking. It's like, "OK, great. Because I know I want to dance for an artist and I know I want to do this, but I might want to direct for a film one day or I want to be in partnership with a big company already and then own my own company, etc." So that is beautiful and thank you so much for sharing that and answering that so beautifully. As being the manager of several big names in the dance industry, whether it's dancers, choreographers, artists, period, what do you think is the key to success?

CK: Oh, it's really for me, it's really simple. Be kind, be genuine, and be aligned. But there are so many times that huge companies, networks, brands have said to me personally. That there are so many people who are talented, but it is so much better to work with someone who is talented and easy to work with over someone who is talented and a jerk. And it sounds like, "Well, that's dumb, that's simple. Everybody should know that." But if it's been said, not everybody knows that.

MC: A lot of times I feel like as I was growing in, not even just in the industry, but in the dance world and stuff like that, for opportunities that would come. I feel like people replacing on me that I have to be either tougher or not as nice, to this wall up to be able to get the job done or for people to take me seriously. And I kind of understand what people are saying, but I feel like I struggled because I was trying to find that medium and would see people be terrible in rehearsals as choreographers, be extremely rude, be really tough or dismissive and would get these amazing, incredible opportunities that you like "Will I ever get that?" And it almost makes you think like, "Is that how I'm supposed to be? Is that how I have to be?" And this is especially from a woman and a black woman.

CK: I can stand my ground and I can be firm while respecting who you are and what you do. And I'm demonstrating to you that that is the only thing I'm going to accept in return. I'm not going to come at you sideways and understand that in showing you "I'm not going to come at you sideways," you will not come at me or any of our human sideways, either. Because we don't have to be there. However, we can work together to create some magic that you're not going to be able to create with somebody else. And I hope that we can do that. I don't have to be a monster to demand respect. I can do so coming from a place of love, I don't need to operate from a place of anger, I don't need to operate from a place of fear. I can operate from a place of love. Be transparent with my expectations from the very beginning. What I'm willing to do, what I'm not willing to do, where I'm willing to meet and where I'm not willing to meet. And you firmly and respectfully and politely stand your ground.

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CK: You don't have to be a jerk. And you know what? There is always going to be somebody who it doesn't make sense that they got that job. It doesn't. And guess what? And it wasn't my job to have. And if I'm going to put all my time and effort and energy, I'm not saying that you are, but I know how easy it is because I've been there before. Well, why did so-and-so get that? I have this. I have that. I have this. I have that. And guess what? You do. But for whatever reason, God did not put that job in my path. And it may have been because I needed to learn a lesson from not receiving that or there is something that I was being protected from by not receiving that or receiving that would have stopped me from receiving something else. Quite recently, there was an opportunity that I thought initially, this is a good opportunity and, you know, I'm very faith driven. So as I speak from this, I understand people listening may have a different perspective on their life and I respect that. So I'm only asked that they respect that these are my beliefs. And this is how my life works, and this is how I honour my creator and myself. And I respect that these views are not the same, and I'm not judging anyone for not sharing my views. I honour their views and I just ask that they do the same as I share my story and give my testimony and my experience. But there was an opportunity that came up, and honestly, I was like, "This is great. It's awesome." And I spoke with the artist about it, and we talked about it, and there was just something. I didn't know what it was. I was kind of like, "Oh yeah, I think we should do it." And the artist said, "You know what, I think we need to pass." And I made peace with that, I don't couldn't tell you you why. I was like, "OK, you know what? We're going to pass. I'm with you". So we passed on this opportunity that was honestly great. And then, unbeknownst to us, a short time later, a new opportunity presented itself that was completely insane. Aligned 2000%, truly could not have been more perfect. Same artist. One thing I feel is a strength of mine and of our team is being able to look through opportunity and see things and know when to move forward with it, when to explore it further and when to respectfully decline. And this was an opportunity that as soon as I said, "This is a no. But I feel like it's not a no". Fast forward, had we have taken the opportunity, however, long before that was, it would have made it so we couldn't take this opportunity now that has been taken and could not have been any more divinely appointed for this artist. There's going to be things that you just want to say yes to. But going back to praying on it, focusing on it, is this really what you want? Is this really what you need? And going down those right paths, it's huge.

MC: I agree with you because that's also how I think. So whoever is coming on to listen to this podcast and has an idea of who I am should expect to hear something like that anyway and should be welcome to it. That's huge and that's why I wanted to ask you that because there was a moment in my life where I wasn't connected with that. And it was very hard, especially as a Canadian. I'm a black woman, Canadian, but I'm growing up with mostly white girls. I'm the only black girl who's always placed at the top because of how I dance but wanting certain opportunities that are not yet open to me then but that will be open to somebody else because they're just happened to be in that situation and more privileged to get it.

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MC: And I had to understand that quickly and be like, “Wait a second, I can’t keep looking at things like that. I could do that. Why isn’t it me? I’m being kind. I don’t have to be super mean and run my class or my rehearsal like a drill sergeant or whatever to make to get the job done.” But then I had to connect to my faith as well, and I had to connect to what is meant for me and what I am also ready for. There are a lot of things I would see that I was like, “Oh My God, I know I can do it. I know this is for me”. And it’s like, “Are you ready? Are you in the right, the right mind space? Are you physically ready?” There are so many different things that when you take a moment to truly getting contact with your creator and especially take a step back for yourself and think, “Listen, you’re also, you can also capture too much power on the actual gift that is being given to you because it’s not about that.” Whatever gift that is for you that will come will send you to wherever you need to be and wherever you’re supposed to be. Can you share with us some of the projects that you have for 2021-2022 and the goals you want to achieve?

CK: Choreographing [The Karate Kid – The Musical](#), which will be an on Broadway, which is very, very exciting because Robert Mark Kamen came in who was the original screenplay writer, is writing the musical. Look at that man, he is incredibly talented. He has so many blockbuster hits that he’s done. So to have him actually on the project is incredible and he’s been phenomenal to work with. We are also choreographing and directing another Broadway musical called [Once Upon a One More Time](#). It’s hysterical and beautiful, all at the same time. It is a fractured fairy tale set to Britney Spears catalogue. It is not about Britney Spears, but the music is used brilliantly, and you have to trust me on that because I have seen this project evolve through the different presentations and readings, and it is incredible. And that should open in the next year as well.

MC: It’s so exciting to hear that they’re using like Britney’s catalogue, like an artist’s catalogue to sit for a story. I was on Broadway, on [Holler If Ya Hear Me – The Musical](#). So we used Tupac Shakur’s work and it has nothing to do with his life. When I was a part of that, I was like, “Yeah, this is really smart and fun.” So to hear that they’re doing something like that with Britney, I’m excited.

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CK: A lot of travel. We've got some artists doing some pretty amazing brand ambassador work. We have some other incredible projects. I'm not allowed to share yet, but I'm very excited. I'm excited for where dance is going. I'm excited for projects like [Us Again](#), which it was the short that preceded [Raya and the Last Dragon](#) that was choreographed by Keoni and Mari. And they are actually art and dots in the short, which is entirely told through dance. And that was another, I think a big moment for me to see dance as powerful and in the spotlight, in the forefront as it has now. We went from being artists behind the dancer to being the feature, and that is so beautiful and so special. It's a very exciting time for dance, as you can see with the TV shows and what's doing so well and the different projects. But we do have a lot of really wonderful things coming up. And just to see our humans travelling and working again and being able to create and being able to be part of their dream projects, it's a blessing.

MC: And so am I. It all sounds amazing and inspiring. And on that note, I just want to say thank you. Thank you for not just being here with us today but thank you for what you do. I want to take the time to give you your flowers because you're also fulfilling your purpose and in line with what you're supposed to do. You're helping others do it so that it continues on and that's what we're supposed to do. I thank you for what you do with your humans, with your artists, so that we can all be inspired and I'll do what we do as well. Today was about culture and working conditions for artists. And thank you again so much, Cheyenne, for just dropping all the gems and just being incredible and your beautiful self with us today.