

Notables

Episode 12: Israel Houghton & Chris Atlas

TRANSCRIPT

Chris: You don't realize how difficult it is to get people to actually stand up and engage and do something good, even though they might want to, but to actually carve out the time to do it, it's easier said than done.

Israel: When you have a real relationship with somebody who goes "hey, give me five minutes to tell you what this is." Then it was like oh, oh, yes, I'll make time. I'll move some things around because I'm very passionate about this particular subject. So I think the power of relationship which already my wife and I, just having gotten a taste of what ETM is and what it does and the effect of it, have already become like full on disciples and ambassadors and we're telling everybody about it and trying to get other people engaged. And so I get it. I do get it. It does take a while. Everybody wants to do good, you know, but there's a lot of ways to do good and I just..I feel like we found our lane and finding other people in that same lane to get engaged has been really cool.

Noah: You are listening to Notables, an Education Through Music podcast. As always, I'm your host, Noah, and I'm joined today by Israel Houghton and Chris Atlas. Chris, you will recognize from Notables episode 2. Since we last spoke, he has become a board member of Education Through Music. We'll hear more on that in just a bit. Israel and his wife, Adrian, were recently honored at the 2024 Education Through Music Gala, so today we're going to discuss how that came to be and why putting music back in public schools is such an important cause to Israel and Adrian. Chris, to start us off, I wonder if you could catch us up on what's happened in this past year. How did you end up becoming a board member at ETM?

Chris: Well, I mean, for me, becoming a board member was almost by default, right, and this was when I was at Warner Music Group and I was a while I was there, I was a big part of the DEI initiatives for Warner Music Group because, as we know, as we were coming out of the pandemic and George Floyd and there was this, you know, huge call to action across multiple industries to give back and community outreach. You know, I was one of the senior executives within the company that led the charge, if you will, in terms of how we did that, right, and it's something that I've always been about and committed to. And I saw ETM firsthand through Warner Music Group and visited a few schools and I received the award at last year's gala, 2023's gala, on behalf of Warner Music Group, right, and that was my introduction to ETM. And there were several, you know, organizations that had approached me to support or be a part or donate, and you know, I've...I've donated, I've, you know, spoken, I've done, you know, certain things with those organizations, but ETM was actually the first one that really struck me to actually be a part of in terms of more of a commitment of my time, you know, in terms of joining the board. Because as a, you know, inner city kid I'm born and raised in the Bronx it resonated with me because, you know, I'm like, I was one of those kids, you know, in the Bronx, that these programs, you know, impacted and we didn't have this when I was a kid, and knowing just the economic state of the world and the economy and how a lot of these public schools are

underserved with these types of programs, I was like, well this is something I can really support and commit to and, also in wanting to bring more of my peers into the ETM circle. Because it is something that as a part of the music industry or from an executive or musicians or artists, I wanted to get more of my younger peers involved, right. Because a lot of people, I feel don't do it, you know. And again, as for whatever reason, time schedule, don't know, whatever, right, but I felt like, because this is impacting neighborhood schools, inner city kids, New York, five boroughs, I just felt connected to it.

Noah: Israel. How did you and Chris come to know each other?

Israel: I think I met Yvette first. I think, Chris and I have always been in some of the same circles and have dealt with some of the same producers and music makers, but his wife and my wife have known each other for a couple of decades, so I think that the natural "hey, hey, we're having a thing at our house, come on over." I think Game of Thrones had something to do with it at one point.

Chris: Absolutely, absolutely.

Israel: And just you know when, when you can hook up with fellow creatives and producers and that sort of thing, record people. It's just an easy..It's easy, it's easy to connect, it's easy to find something to connect on. Then he signed a guy a few years ago, right at the beginning of the pandemic that we had had eyes on and loved this kid, and you know that got us talking a little bit more...

Chris: Yeah, Keijan...Keijan Bryant.

Israel: Yeah, man for sure, fantastic talent and then you know just it...you know, when you hear Chris Atlas's name in any room, it's just people sort of sit up differently. You know, and present company included just mad respect for..for what he's done with the industry and certainly incredible respect for his family and his wife. I think is just a supernova.

Chris: I want to add to that too. I mean because, again, I think to that point right, you meet people, even though we may be in the same circles and the same industry, and we meet people all the time. But there isn't necessarily always a chemistry right, there isn't always...

Israel: True.

Chirs: ..Necessarily a connection right, but between his wife, Adrian, my wife, Yvette, and their connection and then the natural connection that we have as a people and as couples. You know, it was natural and I think in that... the naturalness of it, you know, the friendship you know...

Israel: Yeah.

Chris:...Really developed and was genuine, right and again, that's why, in our industry, and Is I know you can relate to this, we don't always deal with genuine people, you know. So it's, it's to me, it's always been about "listen, I want to be around and involved with people that are genuine, because, you know, I've always felt like my, my goal, my life purpose is to have purpose." You know what I mean.

Israel: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Chris: And I'm not just here to be here, you know.

Israel: Yeah.

Chris: So when I could have..be friends with people you know, like Israel and Adrian, and we have that commonality, it just makes the friendship even stronger and it makes the connection even stronger. And it goes back to, you know, even when you know I called, I called Is, and you know it was Yvette and I, we were in the kitchen and we were like "we gotta call Is and Adrian. They need to..you know what I mean. We need to honor them at the gala." And it was just like yes. That was it, you know.

Israel: I'm gonna tell you why it was yes. Because my wife, you know, I don't think...were we on? I think we were on FaceTime.

Chris: Yeah, yup.

Israel: And my wife is out of frame. At one point she's like you got to do this and I was like, cause my wife, I've been asked to be honored at certain things and you know, I just I almost always politely decline because it's nerve wracking for me, just that whole. Now if somebody said, will you please come and honor somebody else, I'm like "oh, I'm there. Of course, yes, tell me where to be." But you become the recipient of something and it's just like this "oh, it's such a challenge for me" but you know never underestimate the power of pillowtalk, my wife is like "no you're doing this. This is a fantastic cause and you need to be a part of this." And so in hindsight a little bit of nervousness and embarrassment or whatever self-deprecation you know to be able to be in that room and just see the magic of that night and meet... just meet people that I know I'm going to know for years and years and years to Chris's point, like when you can interact with genuine people. Because, again, people with means, people with jobs, people with responsibilities, people with other causes that are in their heart don't have to stop what they're doing and and come be a part of you know something that maybe they're, they're at best adjacent to you know, maybe they're not creatives, but they see what we all see and that is there's this massive you know deficit when it comes to public schools in New York and around the nation. But in New York, regarding the arts. And I have good friends of mine, people who I've already basically said "you're coming next year, you don't have a choice and you're going to come to a school with me, come on." And people like Anthony Ramos, for example, who's an amazing actor and musician, and I just said, "hey, you know what's your story" and he told me he's like "if it weren't for the drama class at my school at the time where they still had it, you

know I don't think I'd even be alive right now to talk to you.” And so when I hear things like that these are people who have become lifelong friends of mine I'm going. This has to be addressed, and the fact that the arts have sort of been, you know, economically engineered out of the curriculum is just crazy to me.

Noah: That's a common thread that I hear from a lot of people who have gone on to either continue making music or to do something entirely different is “this music class that I had at this school, this teacher I remember very well and it and it meant the world, it was everything.” So I wonder if we could take that one step further and talk a little bit about your story with your early music education.

Israel: Yeah, I, you know, grew up in a little mining town in Arizona. You know, 8 000 people in the whole town. I was the only black kid, I was the only black person in the town and I was only doing that halfway because I'm half black. But I kind of learned pretty quickly that I'm either just going to be fighting every day because I'm different and you know this is early, you know, mid-seventies, I'm probably 8, 9, 10 years old and just in a fight every single day. You know, I was good at sports and so that was kind of an outlet for me. But that also came with a whole lot of interpersonal conflict and competition and that sort of thing. But I was always drawn to music. I was raised in this little church that my parents pastored so I was always, you know, the kid jumping on the drums at the end of the service when everybody's trying to talk and leave and..There was always music playing in my house. You know there was a piano in my house. My mother is a very, very accomplished concert pianist and in going to school, you know, I picked up the trumpet first. So I learned how to read music that way and I'm just grateful. And I was surrounded by people, even 3rd, 4th grade, who were like “I think you have something different than just the typical kid who picks up an instrument,” because I would kind of gravitate to any instrument and sort of figure it out and just find the soul within, you know, within it. But I think you know, having that escape, you know, I had teachers who were like, “if you want to come early to school, you know I'll, I'll sit with you and we'll, we'll go over this stuff even more.” And one teacher who I mentioned in the speech really challenged me, like, “hey, when you're done with school, go home, do your homework real quick and then pick up this instrument and play it for an hour, two, three a day, like you have the ability to be great at it.” And they just really sort of nurtured that. And this was all public schools, man. And even, you know, even in a feast or famine kind of town like Globe, Arizona, that literally rose and fell on copper pricing, essentially like it was a copper mining town, there was still the arts, man. There was still choir and you know drama, and dance, and you know, theater and music. So you know, I think that that's the kind of stuff that I gravitated to, learned a skill from that I still adopt to this day. I mean, my wife is doing this show in New York on Broadway that they're developing and she's like “babe, can you help me with this? You know, with this music” and it's all sheet music, and I'm like “man, I haven't read sheet music in so long. But here we go” and I'm pulling from experiences 40 years ago to be able to. You know, help my wife, because I'm reading sheet music with no lead sheet, like, ok, I'm actually you know..but I loved it and I was grateful for having that in my foundation, for sure.

Noah: You spend a lot of time as a performer in the spotlight, and so I'm wondering what the difference is between the sort of nerves that you might experience as a performer versus why you might be reluctant to accept this honoree, sort of role in a sort of performance adjacent kind of thing.

Israel: Yeah, you know what to me? I know that it's performance adjacent, but to me there's a Grand Canyon between the two. And I don't know why that is...I think it's probably because I've been singing in front of people since I was five and so whatever nerves had to be dealt with kind of got dealt with. Then again, I tour with people and I collaborate with people who are the kings of the industry and still get so nervous to get on stage. I'm never really that nervous to sing. The other night I was with those kids. I don't know why that made me nervous, but it did. But that was a very rare occurrence for me. I think you know, I don't, I think I could speak to one element of it just in the field that I'm in like as a gospel artist or you know, and even as a gospel artist I'm even more niche than that and I'm a worship leader and so the whole...I say this a lot to worship leaders like the goal of a worship leader is to be looked through, not looked at. Ultimately, I'm trying to point, point the way to you having an encounter with God which is going to definitely do more for you than than me singing a song could ever do, is kind of how you know, not to get too deep and spiritual with it, but like I've always sort of felt like the pressure's on God here, not on me. You know what I mean. All I got to do is just, you know, hopefully have the right heart and motivation going into this. "But you know, god, this is on you." So when it's like all eyes on me, like listen, the last two Grammys I won, I didn't go to the ceremony. I watched it online and we won. And so my collaborator got up and said hey, we want to thank. You know, Israel would like to thank...because it was so nerve wracking for me, like I would be cool, calm and collected until they start naming our category and then I just my leg would start shaking and I'm...start hyperventilating and you know, and I'm like I hate this feeling so much. So I think the idea of like I love the art of it, I love the creativity of it, I love getting on stage and even the interaction of it, but almost as soon as that's done, I go straight introvert, you know, when people stop me on the street or in the airport or you know wherever, "like your music has done so much for me." And you know I just...I don't. I'm like Ricky Bobby in that moment, like I don't know what to do with my hands, like what, what? I'm just just completely paralyzed. So you know I'm working on that, I'm trying to get over that, because I do love the human interaction of all that and love hearing that people have been inspired by what I do and a lot of. I've learned a lot of it by watching Adrian, because she is the polar opposite. She's so gracious, so kind, so approachable, so accessible to anybody who walks up to her, and I want to be that way too, and I and I do strive to be that as well, but it is, it doesn't come without some challenge for me.

Noah: What an incredible honor for ETM to have you know, gotten you to attend when the Grammys couldn't.

Chris: If I can too, I think that's also like just the great thing about Is, right, in terms of his humbleness, right, but he's about the work. So, yeah, his humbleness will be like, "no, I don't want to be honored or I don't necessarily want to go on stage to receive the award," right, which might make him nervous about it. But when you see him on stage he is the most incredible,

magnanimous, engaging performer you could ever see, right. And again, I think that's that duality in terms of he's committed to the work, he's committed to what the work does for people, right, and less so about being praised for the work, right. And I think that that, you know again one is just even more of a reason why you know getting him involved with ETM. But then also, you know him and Adrian, you know accepting to be honored was such a special moment. You know him and Adrian, you know accepting to be honored was such a special moment, you know, because you know I've been able to see firsthand just everything that they do and their commitment to giving back, but that humbleness in terms of not necessarily wanting to be on the stage or recognized for it, you know, and glad that ETM, you know, was able to do that and you know they graciously accepted and wanted to do it.

Israel: Thanks, Chris, that's really kind, man. Appreciate that.

Noah: What was the experience like walking through the halls at PS103 with Adrian as well, who also attended a New York City public elementary school, PS110?

Israel: I think walking through PS103 for me was..it was already special because my brother-in-law attended that school. You know, my brother-in-law is an incredibly accomplished partner with Paul Hastings law firm and I said I think we're pulling up to the school that you said you went to and he's like, "if it's 103 absolutely." All his brothers went there. All of them have become very, very accomplished in their own right and so to walk in there and just sort of already be loaded with potential of what every kid in here can become, because the odds were so stacked against the Alexander family you know my brother-in-law and his family and the fact that they were able to overcome them and point to great teachers at that school. Or you know good outlets at that school. Certainly the music program for Jurid back then, like it was, was life-changing for him. So I already was going in with this sense of it's possible, like there's, there's possibility in here. And I think Adrian had the same experience and, and you know, at the gala she was able to kind of draw from that, even emotionally, of like wow, you know she, she got up on that stage saying I'm not gonna cry, like I'm just gonna....she told me like "I'm gonna say like three words, I didn't prepare a speech and I'm gonna let you you talk." And then she got up there and just blew the room away because she was able to access such a core memory and unlock that. And I think a lot of that got unlocked walking through those halls and seeing those kids sing and just making that connection. So, yeah, I and I'm looking forward to walking through more halls and into more auditoriums, you know, around this city.

Noah: In that same vein, and I guess you've already hinted at this a little bit. My last question is what can we look forward to from this newly established relationship in the future?

Israel: I was in this meeting one time and you know, somebody asked me well, what do you think of this opportunity? And I... this was years, years and years ago, and this was not premeditated...my answer was not premeditated but it was. It came out with such a force that I've held onto it since. I said, life does not move at the speed of opportunity, it moves at the speed of relationship. Because of what I have found, is you could jump into a lot of opportunities and that does not necessarily mean a relationship is going to form out of it. So it doesn't...you

know, good opportunities don't always beget good opportunities. You know, sometimes, if that's your whole motivation, you know it could be like I'm on to the next cool, shiny thing, as opposed to I want to build something that matters and lasts and has like real connect points to it, and so I've built my... I was just talking to somebody about this yesterday like I, I think I still have a career, whereas people who, who do what I do, you know, kind of tend to reach a ceiling, you know, and it's okay and and they're not mad about it, but it's like guys who are heroes of mine. You know, 20, 30 years ago when I was getting started and I haven't heard their name in, in 20 years and and yet I have people come to me all the time like my parents went to your first concert and I'm like, but you're 20 years old, like, what's up with that? You know, and, and it's like, for whatever reason, I've been able to stay active and involved and some would say even relevant. You know, 30 years in, and I think that is a testament to I've always put the premium on developing relationships and and connecting those dots for other relationships and fortunately, good opportunities have followed that almost all the time, almost every time, and so I think, going forward, I went for the bait and I'm hooked. You know, like I'm on this and, and anybody who knows me knows that if I'm excited about something, whether it's a restaurant I just tried or a movie I just saw or whatever, I just become the ultimate used-car salesman in that moment, like "no, you don't understand this thing is in and I've researched it, oh my God." You know, So I've already been doing that, probably annoyingly so, to some of my close friends, and they're all like "bro, if you're, if you're, this excited about this, then of course I'll, I'll be wherever you need me to be" and I, I don't know. I think the chain that Yvette and Chris started by linking us in is only going to, it's only going to expand, it's only going to grow, and I know with certainty that I could say that about Adrian as well and so I think, moving forward, I've already been pitching ideas to other boards that I work with and other organizations that I serve, and just going, "I think there's synergy here and we can do this. And what if we did this? And what if we added this?" And so to your question, moving forward I just see this thing only only increasing and only growing, both financially, but more than the finance of it, like people that have a passion for what we have a passion for and that is, you know, ultimately, again, I'm going to always probably bring everything I do back to what informs it, and that's my faith, and I love God and I love people, and I think, if there's any command that God gave. It's like love God with all your heart and love, love your neighbor as yourself. So it's like if everything in my life boils down to that as the centerpiece on the table, then this is, this is so, you know, right down...the right down the line of what I'm passionate about and what I want to do. So, yeah, moving forward, we're just going to continue to do that.

Noah: Well, I think that's the perfect place to leave things for now, Israel. Thanks so much.

Israel: Thank you for your time and I love talking about this and I'll talk about it anytime, so thank you.

Noah: Thank you, thank you both for your time. I really appreciate it, especially on a Saturday.

Chris: Yeah, no, I mean, it is again. Just thank you. Thank Adrian, you know, thank you for just your commitment to the ideas and meeting with Janice and the board and just you know, I think,

everything I know you're going to continue to bring to ETM via your, your community of artists and producers and so really excited for what's ahead. So thank you

Israel: Likewise. Thank you guys.