

ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - SK SHLOMO (Katie Elliott & SK Shlomo)

My guest today is award-winning beatboxer and live looper, SK Shlomo. Having previously collaborated with Björk, Ed Sheeran and Damon Albarn, he's just completed his solo debut album, *Surrender*. He's also the host of #WEARELISTENING, the mental health awareness livestream series.

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SK Shlomo, how are you doing?

I'm alright, thanks. How are you?

I'm really good, thank you. I think you've been having a very busy time of it lately?

I have been having a busy time of it, yeah. I've literally spent the last three days and nights just going through 736 emails. I was just sat there and it took me so long to actually look at them because it was just getting worse and worse and worse. And now I've got it down to about 50 and I'm like, "Ahhh, this is great". But like, having a bit of time is just so hard to do in this current whirlwind that I've created for myself.

So just fill us in a bit. What have you been up to you and why have you been so busy just lately?

Well, my whole world has dramatically changed over the last couple of years really. So I lived the first like 10, 11, 12 years of my adult life in an absolute whirlwind cos I was doing a lot of beatboxing and live looping and I was living on tour a lot and winning lots of awards and I was like the World Looping Champion and I was breaking world records and I just had this drive, right? Every time I achieved something it wasn't enough and I was going to go and do the next thing and show the world even more how amazing I was. It was exhausting. And I never made any recordings, like, I never made an album or even a single. Which was kind of unusual because the other acts who were playing on the same kind of festival stages and stuff like that, were definitely making lots of recordings and selling them and showing up in a tour bus. And you know, I was with my mate in a Ford Focus or whatever - and it's because I focused solely on the live element of the music industry. And I kept on repeating this kind of mantra that I didn't need to make an album or I wouldn't because beatboxing is a live art form. You have to see it in the room to understand how amazing it is. You have to see it. And whilst you might love the sounds that beatboxers make when they're creating an entire orchestra with

their voice, you wouldn't necessarily want to listen to a recording of that. Anyway, it was almost two years ago now I realised or owned up or admitted that that was an excuse rather than a mantra - that was a mask for my fear of not being enough, right? And I kind of was able to acknowledge that I had these three main fears of not being enough as a singer, a songwriter or a producer. So I had this kind of moment of strength and I cancelled everything. I had like a whole year planned out of shows and stuff I was doing. And I cancelled all of it because I wanted to make an album. And I thought it wouldn't take me long to make the album and then get back out on the road. But that process of pausing the whirlwind of my lifestyle was so hard because I didn't have a hurricane of activity to distract me from my own difficult emotions and sitting and trying to write music.... I wrote five tracks in five days and I was like, "I'm a genius". And then, on the sixth day, I just fell into this pit of despair. And I very quickly became suicidal, like within a few days of that, and I was in a really bad place. But it meant I had to do something. I had to take an absolutely monumental step, which was to admit that I wasn't okay, first of all, to myself and then to my loved ones. And that, as you know, having been through it too, is the absolutely humongous first step you can take towards recovery. It's like the 90% step that you do in one go. And the rest of it is really hard but knowing that it's never going to be as hard as that. Once you can admit to yourself that you're not okay and that something's got to change, you are so much more powerful.

Absolutely, but - I don't know how it was for you, Shlo - but in my experience actually recognising the nature of the not-okayness that I was feeling was the tricky one, in that I don't think I had words for it for a long time. I don't know about you? So I, I think for me there was a lot of paddling under the surface. You know, I looked like I was doing right on the top but underneath I was paddling furiously to try and keep everything afloat. But I don't think I had a great deal of insight into what was going on or the fact that perhaps it wasn't healthy. Did you realise, do you think, all along that there was something that needed to come to the surface or was it a bit of a surprise to you too?

I knew I wasn't right, not that I would admit it to anyone else or even think about it for very long. But I mean I had a much less terrifying but still significant breakdown quite a while ago, like 10 years - cos I did a post about this on social media last week that I've been now 10 years completely clean and sober, which I'm really proud of. And so I was able to recognise that I was struggling with addiction, but I wasn't able to understand why and what the causes were. So then those addictions - I conquered them, "Look, another amazing thing I've done!", but I hadn't dealt with the fact that those addictions just transferred into something else. So then for me it just transferred into work or other Internet addictions, which are a very real thing or like problems with food or relationships or there's so many things you can be addicted to without necessarily taking hard drugs every day. But like I say, I wasn't

able to fully understand what was going on. And this thing that happened to me, nearly two years ago now, was it was a real changing point because I could admit that I wasn't okay. And then I could (it took a long time, but I could) get help. And there's this amazing charity called BAPAM, which is the British Association of Performing Arts Medicine - so it's performing arts, they specialise in people in my world. And they got me, they referred me to a specialist, who understands about performers and entertainers and artists. And then that therapist referred me to a trauma specialist. And I found out a whole bunch of stuff that I'd been trying to bottle up about a really significant trauma that happened to me when I was four years old and I had a near death experience. And understanding a little bit more about why I might be feeling this huge sense of responsibility, like I had to be okay all the time, was massive. And it took me about a year of recovery before I was ready to speak out about what had happened and I kept working on the album the whole way through it, when I could, when I was able, and then I made a decision that I was going to be open and that's where my world just transformed. Because back in June, so a few months ago, I did this kind of 'coming out' video about depression and a lot, you know, my friends and family, a lot of them didn't know, and my fans definitely didn't know cos I was never that open with my fans. And I launched a crowdfunding campaign where I said, "Look, we're going to raise money for a mental health charity. I'm going to make a record about recovery. I want you to be part of it. I want us to all talk about it". I started a livestream series where I was getting other creative people to talk about their journeys and we had some really high profile people open up about what they've been through and it went really well at first - and then it just stopped. This was over the summer and I was having some real doubts and I was thinking, "Am I going to be able to do this? Like we've got to 15%, how am I going to get 85% more?" And just at that point when I was very vulnerable, I got some really abusive tweets from a troll who claimed to be a fan but he said some really awful stuff about mental health and, specifically, suicide being evolution's way of weeding out inadequate men who weren't fit to reproduce. And I know that whoever that person is, they must be having a hard time. I know that I can just block and move on, but it really hit me hard. And this is why I need to tell you because the first person who happened to text me to see if I was okay, it was you. You texted me.

We had a little chat, didn't we?

It had just happened. That was really momentous because you know, being able to talk to you about it was a big deal for me because I could just express what happened and you could validate how I was feeling about it. But if something that painful and triggering had happened six months earlier, you wouldn't have known I was in pain and other people in my life or even people - like lots of people I don't know reach out to me every day at the moment - wouldn't have known I was in pain.

And the fact that I had that network saved me because I spun back out into suicidal thoughts pretty quickly when that happened. But I decided to take power from it. And I'd done this really in-depth interview with a journalist and I hadn't published it because I just didn't have the guts to share it. And I just posted up this thing and it said, "I've been attacked about my mental health, so here's my truth. I'm just going to give it all". And then honestly, that day was a huge turning point. It went all around the world and the crowdfunding campaign zoomed up and we hit 110% or something and now, here it is, I've finished the album now. It's coming out in March and I've started releasing music and started being asked to do all this stuff around mental health and speak on panels and I'm doing a TED talk, which is going to be called "Social media saved me from suicide". I never set out to do it, I wasn't like, "I'm going to be a mental health champion". I just wanted to tell my story and I did all of it for selfish reasons - like the livestream, it's for selfish reasons. I wanted to talk about it, I wanted to have a safe space to talk about it. And the album, I've done it for me like I wanted to tell the story and, yeah, it's great if it helps other people, but like, "It's for me guys!"

(excerpt from *Invisible* from SK Shlomo's new album, *Surrender*)

For me, making music - you know, you're an incredible musician, you must understand that feeling - there's certain moments where you're not doing it for anyone else, you're not doing it to look good or to achieve anything it's just you're flying, you're just free. And those moments are absolutely gold, because it's like all of this stuff that you do with addiction is kind of trying to get that feeling but in a really destructive way. But when you achieve it because you've aligned everything in the right way and you can just fly, it's such an incredibly powerful and empowering thing to do. So for example, in making this album I've tried so hard all the way through not to be thinking about the end goal. So when you're creating something, the worst thing you can be thinking is, "Oh, are people going to like this?" Or, "Is this good enough to be a hit?" Or this or that - like if you're enjoying the process itself and you're taking pleasure from the learning and the growing and the building blocks of building your house, rather than focusing on the great big finished house, you're focusing on that one brick you're laying, it's like mindfulness or whatever, whatever you want to call it. That is my dream. And sometimes I get it, sometimes it happens and other times I can be sat there knowing that my motivations are less wholesome. But it's worth it - you kind of have to sit through those days when you do feel like it's forced and it's never going to happen because if you don't sit there in that chair or, you know, on that stage, whatever it is you're doing, you won't get those moments where you fly. You've got to be dedicated and put that commitment in to get that pay-off and that's hard. Really hard.

Yeah. That's something I've noticed this year cos I've really gone out of my comfort zone, a bit like you I have been doing some things that that have pushed me really quite hard. And what I've noticed once or twice is that things have been really uncomfortable in the process of preparing to do something, to speak or to write something, and then I've had a couple of moments where I've just thought to myself, "I know that this is something I have to do and if it's this difficult, it will have been worthwhile." And I can't quite see how it will be worthwhile and I don't know, there's a faith in it, really, a faith in the process. It's not a self punishing kind of difficult-ness, if you like. It's just a going-through, you know, 'the only way out is through' kind of thing. It's that enduring and persisting and you can almost feel yourself growing stronger as you do it. Do you know what I mean?

Yeah. Ah that's so great to hear. The stuff you're doing's amazing as well. Like, not that you should need my external validation to feel good about it but I feel good about it.

Thank you, Shlo. Thank you. I would love to ask you, cos I think that being a performer, being in the public eye in the way that you are - irrespective of all the talking about mental health, which is a whole other thing and requires a whole other bravery - it's quite something to put yourself in front of people and to be fielding their responses, whether they're positive or negative. It's an extraordinary thing to do, I think, to be a performer. So I'd love to ask you specifically about some things that you use to keep you well, physically or mentally. Have you got any things that other people might be able to apply in their own lives?

Yeah, I mean there's loads of stuff I've found useful which isn't going to be, it's probably not going to be anything mind-blowing, but I find yoga is really helpful. Just kind of brings me back into my body and just feels really good. Like, if you don't feel good - that's such a big thing with difficult emotions and difficult lives is that you don't feel good. Within 10 minutes or even if you've only got five minutes, you can do some stuff that just feels really good, your body just feels, "Ah, that's lovely!" And you deserve that, you're a human being and you deserve to feel good. And it's like, I just find that so helpful. So yeah, yoga and all the kind of thinking that comes with it. So like, breathing, and being conscious with your actions and your feelings and thoughts. I mean, it's hard to put in practice so I'm not going to pretend I'm like some Zen master. I still have really difficult days with it, but they have helped me and when I've been able to get a bit of a routine going with that, it's definitely shown. Yeah. Looking after your body, eating - if you can find a way to like eat well - and sleeping properly. And quitting stimulants was a huge change in my health, like 10 years ago I stopped drinking alcohol and doing any kind of recreational drugs. I also quit caffeine because I noticed once I'd taken them out of the way, caffeine was sending me crazy. I'm quite a hyper person so caffeine just

sends me crazy. It's sad because I love coffee, but I'm now a peppermint tea aficionado. And coping with what comes with that - so if you don't drink coffee or you don't drink alcohol or you don't join in with certain activities, it can create a bunch of cultural difficulties and social difficulties where people feel like somehow you're judging them - coping with all that takes a lot of practice. And I found just being able to say, "I'm 10 years sober" - four words - and it tells so much of a story that people don't feel criticised by it and they know just to let it go. All those types of little things really help me.

If you could come up with a *Little Challenge* for our listeners here, what would your *Little Challenge* be?

My *Little Challenge* would be to create a truth, that doesn't have to be pretty, but it's a truth, it's something honest that you're going through or that is affecting you, and share that with another human being. So I've got this thing on my social media called 'Truth Tuesdays', just a little hashtag that I created and a lot of my supporters do it now it on a Tuesday we just post up something that we're thinking about, it doesn't have to be something big and horrible, but just a bit of honesty. But if you're not using social media, then you can do it in real life. Or you could write a letter or you could, there's so many ways you can communicate. Because we're evolved to be in a tribe, in a village, and our modern society doesn't really work in the same way with us looking out for each other, so we can create a virtual village by doing that using the internet or using analogue means to share some truth. So that's what I would suggest to people. If you are looking for a *Little Challenge* that can enhance your life, that only takes a few minutes. Think of a truth and share that with someone. It doesn't have to be anything difficult.

Beautiful. Thank you, thank you.

Pleasure.

So if people would like to find out more about you and your new album, where should they go?

SKShlomo.com or the same thing (SKShlomo) on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, all of those. And some of the music's out already and then the album comes out in March and I'm off on tour and I'm really happy to be back, back in business.

It's so good that you are. Thank you so much for your time. It's an absolute pleasure and a privilege.

Ah, thanks for having me.