

## Partners Transcript: Daveed & Rafael

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- Daveed: Yeah.
- Rafael: I don't remember—
- Daveed: It's like, I don't even know this guy and then this is the person I work with on everything.
- Rafael: And I'm pretty sure I said to him, I was like, "This is my best friend."
- Daveed: I'm Daveed Diggs.
- Rafael: I'm Rafael Casal.
- Daveed: And we're buddies.
- Hrishikesh: It's a little hard to summarize the partnership between Daveed and Raphael, because as best friends and creative collaborators, they've done so much over the years together. Let me start individually. Daveed Diggs won a Tony and a Grammy for his performance in Hamilton. He played Thomas Jefferson and the Marquis de Lafayette in the original Broadway cast. He's also the vocalist in the experimental hip hop group Clipping. Rafael Casal is an actor, writer and director. He's an award winning slam poet and started appearing on HPOs Def Poetry Jam at the age of 18. Over the 20 years these guys have known each other, they've worked in theater, poetry, music and film and usually in some combination of those mediums. They co-wrote and co-starred in the film Blindspotting, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2018. President Obama named it one of his favorite movies of the year. Blindspotting takes place in Oakland, which is also where Daveed and Rafael are from. Their story begins at Berkeley High School. Here's Daveed.
- Daveed: I'm not sure when we met or when we were formally introduced, but surely at some sort of poetry event, because we were both sort of coming up in that scene. I was older, I was four years older than him.
- Rafael: My freshman year, his senior year. That's a lifetime apart in high school. My memory of him in high school is Diggs always had a very nonchalant way about him. I don't know that this paints it accurately, but this is a representation of it, at some point Diggs was like, "I'm just wearing pajama pants to school every day," and I'm sure that wasn't the whole time, I got this little window of it.
- Daveed: It was the whole time. All of high school, for sure.
- Rafael: That's amazing.

Daveed: It was as a rule. But we would see each other at these poetry events and he was really, really good at writing poems. A way more sort of focused writer than I had ever been in that situation, you know? So I remember that. I remember thinking that here's a person that's actually better than me at this thing and that's pretty cool. Then over the years, also after when I was in college, when I'd come back home for the summers, sometimes I'd drop in just to watch poetry things that were happening, sort of check in on the scene. He was the dude, he had become that guy.

Rafael: I remember that so differently. I barely finished high school in a very nontraditional way and then went off and did this show on HBO, Def Poetry.

Rafael (clip): This just in, a skewed perspective for today's youth. Y'all ladies ain't thin enough, fellows ain't trim enough. Want to be sexy, y'all don't go to the gym enough, cut to commercial.

Rafael: I came back and had just enough money saved up with some friends to open a very dungeon-y recording studio and we were looking for other artists. We didn't have anybody else recording at the studio. So a mutual friend of ours, one of his close friends who was the older brother of one of my close friends was like, "You know Daveed raps?"

Daveed: Yeah, we really got set up on a rapper play date. So our friend Justin was like, "You guys should work together. You're two of my favorite rappers." I was like, "Yeah, yeah." And he played me his stuff and it was really good. I didn't have anywhere to record, I was recording songs in my Mom's closet, in the little closet in my room. I hadn't been in a lot of studio spaces, so I was like, oh, a studio?

Rafael: I don't know that this qualified as an actual studio.

Daveed: I didn't know that yet because I hadn't been there yet.

Rafael: But I don't think we had any idea what meeting each other and actually getting time was going to be like.

Daveed: Finally we started. It was like, this is the song we're going to work, we had listened through some beats and it was like, "Let's work on this one." I just started writing and, yeah, it happened really fast. At some point we looked up and everyone else was gone and it was just the two of us in there and we were still making music.

Daveed (clip): Run it down, let's go

Rafael: We just made music until the sun came up and began the ritual that day of going to the car at 8:00 AM and playing everything that you'd recorded and then dragging your body home to sleep and kind of doing it all over again.

Daveed (clip): (rapping)

Daveed: I'd been making music for many, many years and it had never been that much fun before.

Rafael: Suddenly there's this person that writes a verse in five minutes and can nail it in a take. And at the time we were working with some random singers and stuff that couldn't ever sing the line and rappers who took an hour to get a verse down. It was just like, "Wow, this is so easy," and then we'd just have songs done. What we always joke about is there's sort of a before we met and an after we met and no gradient.

Daveed: Yeah.

Rafael: I don't remember-

Daveed: Like, I don't even know this guy and then this is the person I work with on everything.

Rafael: And I'm pretty sure at the same time, I was like, "This is my best friend."

Daveed: As a young artist early on when I'm still trying to figure things out and creating is hard for me, being around somebody who just creates all the time, it's addictive. I don't have the technical skill set that Rafa has, so he was so fast in Pro Tools. He was all of these things that I just would have to labor over and then all of that stuff became really impressive too. Once, as we started working together and I became aware that he had taught himself all of these things, nobody ever really showed him how to do anything, it seemed like. And he was editing videos and shooting things, the whole range of what it takes to be a music artist out in the world he had taught himself to do. I didn't really know anybody like that.

Rafael: Over the next four or five years we recorded hundreds of songs-

Daveed: So many more songs-

Rafael: ... that no-one's heard.

Daveed: ... that no-one will ever hear.

Rafael: Legit hundreds and wrote a play together and then we lived together and it was like, oh man. When we're around each other this much it's like we have too many ideas. It was the right amount of proximity for the full version of creativity that we had always ... we had thought we'd already tapped it and we did so much shit that year. I think artistically we were doing great.

Daveed: Yeah, we're definitely making it and we were definitely broke.

Rafael: People knew us.

Daveed: It was just a combination of the thing, it was like-

Rafael: We got on the radio.

Daveed: This is also great, listen to he says we, because really Rafa was known, right? He had a song that got played on Clear Channel radio and then got named one of the Bay Area Freshmen 10.

Rafael: Best New Whatever.

Daveed: He got named one of those, but Rafa never would take that for himself, it was always us. We are. We played those shows together and would end up making no money on these gigs because he would bring me and a band, four or five other people to play music, use the entire fee to fly us out to wherever, Georgia and play a show where no-one would make any money but we got to play a show. He was doing that from jump for so long.

Hrishikesh: Why was that how you would always do it?

Rafael: Well because, one, I don't, I'm uncomfortable with I statements.

Daveed: The Berkley-est shit.

Rafael: The Berkley-est shit, anybody's ever said. I'm uncomfortable with I statements, they feel self indulgent. I was raised to not feed an ego that feels constantly eager for food. What I love about that period is we were all pushing to little different degrees of success. We're just kind of weirdos almost in a scene that we kind of make sense in. They didn't understand Diggs very much at all, I feel like the more commercial Bay Areas scene and they only sort of understood me. It was very you're in, but don't try to make any changes, you know? And I think that's a big reason that we went to LA. We could see the top of the ladder and it's not getting any friendlier or more receptive. We maybe can make this movie and maybe there's different music opportunities down there, but it's definitely not going to happen here. And then suddenly we packed up from the West Oakland place and moved to LA.

Daveed: Also we had already been, we were working on Blindspotting, so we'd been traveling up and down. Our producers, we had been driving to meet with them really frequently.

Rafael: We were slumming it so hard when we got to LA, we were so poor. Diggs was delivering tacos.

Daveed: Yeah. I was like ... I couldn't be an actor in LA, is what I decided.

Rafael: We're just swinging and missing, just trying to figure out what does it mean to be in the bigger pond and want to be artists professionally. We did five years in LA before Diggs went to New York to do Hamilton. I think that was one of those things that came about for Diggs really organically. Hamilton was such an interesting like muscle, it was a play, it was legit written for him to flex all the things he's good at. They were like, "Who's this rap kid that turns out can also act?" And the rest of us were like, "Turns out? He's been doing that more than a lot of y'all. You know?" And the world saw Diggs in the light that best showed everything and they not only accepted, but obsessed over it. And then I went to visit him in New York when the show was picking up steam and the first thing that happened is this girl grabs my arm and looks at Diggs and goes, "Oh my God, is that Daveed Diggs?" to me and I start to realize that this woman is Anne Hathaway and she's fan-girling out. I'm like, "Oh man, a major shift is happening."

Daveed: My life is changing very, very quickly. I was under stress constantly. Rafa is calling and texting and emailing and I'm getting back to the degree that I can. So yes, obviously it would have been so much easier and nicer if my best friend was also living in New York and somebody who has context for me outside of this thing.

Rafael: I remember like at some point like, I turned to Diggs and I was like, "I'm thinking about moving to New York so you'll respond more in person." I remember Diggs goes, "I didn't want to ask."

Daveed: That's a big ask and I'm doing eight shows a week. It's not like, move to New York and let's go kick it in the Berkshires, you know? It's like, move to New York and I'll see you at midnight sometimes.

Rafael: But I was like, well it's just good for him to have a friend there. But also can I run your social media? Because you're not posting enough and people want to see this adventure and there's a sincere way to do it. And I had done a little bit of it with his Twitter and stuff in the Bay and in LA, but this was like, "Give me your passwords." I probably already had them.

Daveed: This was an admission that he was going to use them.

Rafael: I was letting him know that I was going to do it.

Daveed: On a regular basis. And I was like, "Yeah, yeah, do that."

Rafael: And especially if you actually hadn't been able to do it, you didn't have to be self-indulgent, I'm doing it. There's a year of his Instagram that's just his friend's version of how awesome he is.

Rafael: Blindspotting got started because, around when I was 21, one of my friends got killed in a way that sort of didn't make a lot of sense to most people in the community. And it was sort of the breaking point because it was a woman,

because it was somebody who wasn't really involved in the violence of the world that we were existing in at the time. Some other people had been killed and other people I sort of was close to. There was a series of funerals people had gone to in succession and this was the button on it. It was just a breaking point for me. And so I had written this poem about sort of the numbness of that experience of like, "God, is this what life is? People die and we get numb and we care a little less every time? How does this go?" And then we just kind of started coming up with a story that was a movie that's in verse starring the two of us. We kept almost making Blindspotting and not making it. Diggs, he finishes this massive sensation in New York. He had 30 days in June that he could shoot this movie-

Daveed: 22.

Rafael: ... and then a month later we were in Oakland shooting the movie.

Daveed: In the hometown, like everybody who's an extra in that movie is a friend of ours that we grew up with.

Rafael: Yeah. And it's still not a real movie to us. It's still a thing we can't believe they made.

Daveed: In Hollywood, in a world that we always assumed we didn't belong in, that we never really figured out how we would fit into anyway. To have doors start opening in a way where they're sort of asking questions about what you want to do is crazy actually. It's just fun in meetings post Blindspotting now that we're associated together in this way and also people have been able to see that Rafael is a great actor as well as a great writer. It's like, "Well what's he doing? Do you think he'd be interested in this? Can you talk to him for us?" It's pretty ... I love that. I love that so much.

Rafael: And I still know the 10 things that he can do that nobody's seen yet. And that's still fun for me.

Daveed: The closest I have ever gotten to fighting with Rafa I think is when somebody else I'm close to is fighting with Rafa, right?

Rafael: I think that's sort of our good cop, bad cop type of ... where someone will be venting to him and he's like, "I don't know what to tell you, I've already picked my team." We have this expression that we always say, we did this before every show and we kind of do it anytime we're at a crossroads. We're like-

Together: Energy up, expectations down.

Rafael: It's just like this whole ship runs on enthusiasm.

Hrishikesh: Daveed Diggs and Rafael Casal are partners. Go watch their film Blindspotting and check out the album they put out together last year, called Seven Nights in Chicago. You can follow them on Twitter or Instagram @DaveedDiggs and

@RafaelCasal. Rafael probably still has the passwords to Daveed's accounts. Partners is made by me, Hrishikesh Hirway. I produced, edited, and made the music for the show. With editing help on this episode from Maureen Hoban and Zach McNees. Partners is a MailChimp podcast made in partnership with Radiotopia. Find out more at [mailchimp.com/presents](http://mailchimp.com/presents) and at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm). Thanks for listening.