

This is Catching The Editor's Eye, and I'm your host, Georgia Alexia Benjou.

Georgia Being a creative has always been a bit of an island, isolated, intense, and often invisible. But what happens when you bridge that gap with community and coaching? Today's guest, Matthew LeBaron, is the founder of Much Creative, and he's redefining the relationship between talent and the brands they serve. From heading up the CGI division at Bernstein and Andriulli to coaching artists to entangle the stories they tell themselves. Matthew is proof that the most scalable asset in a digital world is still human connection. If you've ever felt like you're shouting into the void of an algorithm, this episode is for you. Matthew, welcome to the show.

Matthew LeBaron Thank you so much. I have no idea what to say after such a brilliant introduction. I think I might need you on all of my calls and yeah, I might just start sending that to people instead. But thank you so much for having me.

Georgia My pleasure, Matthew. You have over 20 years of experience in artist relations. How did you begin working with artists and what is it that attracted you to this business?

Matthew LeBaron Yeah, that's a great start off question. I think ultimately being an artist, you know, from such a young age, I was surrounded by creative people. I grew up in a gown shop with my mom and my grandmother. They were making and altering dresses. They called it Rent a Gown—it was like Rent the Runway pre-internet—you know, this was the 80s and 90s. So, I was always around really creative people. I have been drawing since I was four and my whole life has been about art. So, when the opportunity presented itself to support artists—I needed to get a day job—I had absolutely no corporate experience. So I applied for this art assistant position at Bernstein & Andriulli, and really that was like the jumping off point for everything that's happened since.

Georgia I love the fact that you talk about how you were an artist from such a young age.

Matthew LeBaron Yeah, creativity is one of those innate abilities I believe everybody's born with. And what happens is I see is oftentimes people get trained out of it, right? Like you can't make a living doing that. You can't live with your head in the clouds. You know, I grew up with my head in the clouds and I also was gravitating towards films like Neverending Story and The Goonies and all these movies that were so creatively charged at like a young person could say, okay, I could do anything, really, if I'm creative about it. Yeah.

Georgia Yeah, I think that's important, like you said, I feel like so many kids these days get sort of pushed into what is at STEM, right? All the science, math, that's all I keep hearing about. anytime someone's interested in something creative, that's exactly what I hear: You can't make a living doing that.

Matthew LeBaron I beg to differ. Yeah.

Georgia Exactly. Well, after two decades in the game, was there a specific moment or a specific conversation with an artist where you realized that the traditional agency model wasn't working for you or the artist that you represent?

Matthew LeBaron Yeah, yeah, absolutely. and funny enough, I'm a few days, one day actually, shy of our nine-year anniversary, but it wasn't nine years ago that I had that conversation. It was more like 15 or 16 years ago. I was halfway through my time at Bernstein & Andriulli. I hadn't known it at that point, but it was like 6-ish years in, and that's when artists started talking to me about different things that they needed beyond bringing the job, doing the estimate, you know, getting it approved, signing the contracts and sending an invoice. I started to hear murmurs that like this just wasn't enough for people. And that's when the idea really started to take hold of like, okay, what would more look like?

And it started off as a conversation around, I called it my Jerry Maguire moment because I just, wanted to give artists more attention. And you can't do that when you have 80 illustrators and 20 animation studios and a CG roster of 12. You become part of this machine, and rightly so, I mean, that works and makes money. But you can't have those kinds of close relationships.

And so that's the seed that was planted, that then grew into this idea of Much Creative and the trajectory into building community through artists relationships and leadership coaching in the creative world. Like it all just progressed from those conversations. And I can't say it was any one conversation. There were a lot of artists at that time in studios who were like, we just need more. Like what? What would more look like?

Georgia Well, the name "Much Creative" feels very expansive. When you were naming the company, were you trying to evoke the idea of an excess of creativity or was it something else that prompted you to go with that name?

Matthew LeBaron I'm really lucky in that a lifelong friend of mine, Michael Green, is a fantastic marketer. He knows exactly how to come up with the right wording to describe anything. And he's been at all the major marketing firms like Sterling Brands, et cetera. And he sat down with me and he's like, let's just do a word dump first. And we worked through that and then we whittled it down. And when it got to "much," it had been a combination of things that really led us to that.

I've always been told I'm too much: Growing up, I was like too energetic, too hyper, too many ideas, like too everything, like way too much. And then in like queer culture, a friend of mine, , whenever we really liked something, we'd be like, that's "much". It was, so was like a little bit of like, like slang. And then, we talked about what we wanted to be and Much Creative, really to your point, feels very expansive. It gives us room to grow—doesn't pigeonhole us.

You know, at the time a lot of my contemporaries were so-and-so represents or so-and-so agency or so-and-so productions. And that's really limiting, but that's not who I am. I can't be one thing. It's just never worked for me. even when I started coaching, they're like, you need a niche. I was like, fuck yourself. Like I don't need anything. Oh, wait, sorry, can I swear on this or will I be bleeped out? Oh, okay. So, I'm always somebody to be like, if anybody tells me I can't do something, I'm oftentimes like, are you sure? But yeah, "much" really did come from an amalgamation of parts of my life to be expressed through the naming of this company that I run.

Georgia I love the fact that your attitude to people who try to limit you or pigeonhole you is to just push back against that. I think that's great. I think we need more of that.

Matthew LeBaron Yeah. Well, for anybody listening, if you ever work with me, just, mean, give it a whirl, you know, see how it goes.

Georgia Well, I love that part of what you do at Much Creative is, like you said, not only working with talent and clients, but really focusing on building community. Why did you feel that was so important to include in your services?

Matthew LeBaron I got to say, I think there's a right professional answer here, but I need to give you the one that like lives here, which is that I would not be who I am today without all of the various communities I've existed in in my life. And as a queer man, community has like gotten our culture through so many and currently is getting us through so many difficult times. And I just noticed that

Georgia (09:15) Yeah. Absolutely.

Matthew LeBaron When I am in community with people, when I'm around people, when I'm doing things like this, when I'm in conversation with people, whether it's two or 80, it's something happens, something lights up, something different starts to form. So, community was a natural progression in terms of what we offer.

Georgia I think that's so important, especially for independent artists and designers who are frequently kind of operating in an isolated environment, right? I remember during COVID, I started, I think it was like a biweekly or monthly meeting for designers, because I just realized people were so alone and frustrated. I felt like sometimes they were just vent sessions, but it was great for people just to

Matthew LeBaron Yes.

Georgia talk things out and then people would be like, I have a resource for that or whatever it was. And so, then they would get referrals it was sort of just like a natural way of building people's relationships with one another.

Matthew LeBaron Yeah, yeah. And you touch on a really important point. Well, two important points. One, we're on like the six-year anniversary of when we went into lockdown, which somebody reminded me of the other day and I was like, wow. And that prompted a whole other, train of thought around isolation. You know, we went through this whole period where we learned, okay, use it or lose it, right? We got, we opened back up, we cured COVID in a way, and we're able to get back together.

And now we're starting to see that isolation happening again, because we are animals who don't learn very well and we don't like to know how to take something we've learned and change, right? it's hard. I think that the interesting thing about isolation is it hits freelancers, it hits creative studios. One thing I don't think people realize is isolation hits leaders the hardest. I think people have this vision or this idea of creative leaders or leaders in general as being these people who are once they get to the top, everything's cool. That's one of the loneliest places.

Georgia Yeah.

Matthew LeBaron It's one of the loneliest places and you can't really show uncertainty or show like a vulnerable side in leadership, typically corporate leadership. But what I learned through coaching was that your best leaders actually are the most vulnerable. They're the ones who tap into their team. They're the ones who rely on other people to bring their ideas to life or to change their ideas and make them better.

Georgia I really think that's so intelligent. I'm in that group, right? Where it's like you can feel very isolated working. So, I think it's a great way of...

Matthew LeBaron So it resonates, yeah.

Georgia Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Thank you. It resonates. There you go. Matthew, since you've transitioned from that traditional agency model into more of a creative coach with a wellness angle, correct? Why isn't just getting the gig enough for artists anymore in 2026?

Matthew LeBaron This is going to be a bit of a long-winded answer, but I'll do my best to condense it and I give you permission to edit it.

So, all right. So, wellness, first and foremost is such a overused word. It's so frustrating. I talked to a couple of my artists about this because we do workshops on wellness and we're like, we need a different word. Like this word has been co-opted by corporate America and by like just everybody. there's just so many snake oil salesmen out there selling wellness. I, please forgive me for using the word as much as I'm about to...

So creative talent often times are so gig oriented. Next job, next job, next job, next job. And even creatives in creative agencies who have full-time gigs, once you launch that campaign for, let's say you're Adidas client, it's like, what's next? It's always what's next. And the thing that's never next is I need rest. I need to take care of myself. I need to go out and be in the trees, touch grass, as they say. I need to eat some healthy meals, I've been up all night working through this deadline, et cetera. And so, this wellness angle, again, it was always there.

I always had this thing in my heart that happened when I would do a job with artists at my old job. And then another one would come in and I could see the sigh that they'd have of like, okay, I'll do this. I'm like, I wish I didn't have to. I heard in coaching, it's called hearing what they're not saying. And I would hear what they weren't saying. And I was like, in my heart of hearts, was like, jeez, I wish I could just tell them we don't have to do this job. But as you know, and as I know, if the jobs are coming in, you do them, you never say no.

And so, for a long time, it had been inside of me, like, how do I help people live more balanced lives really in an industry that really doesn't support balance? all of the corporate speak and all the jargon says they do, all the agencies, you you go on websites, you see this beautiful moniker of like what they do and who they are and the about us. And then you talk to people who work there and they're like, this place is a sweatshop, you know? And it's very real. And so there was just this request I could hear underneath everything else that begged for this to come forward.

Georgia I know when I first started styling when I felt like I finished a job, two things would hit me at first. One is, like you said, it's like the come down. You've you've worked, worked, worked, worked, worked. You're kind of like on this kind of like on a high and then you kind of everything just sort of drops off, right? Because everything stops. And so then, like you said, you're looking for your next job. And so

Matthew LeBaron Yeah. Know what that sounds like? Cocaine addiction. Both, right? I mean, it sounds like a drug, and it is, you know, like it's, it's this, I don't think people realize freelance life is very much like a drug. Oh My God, someone wants me for my thing. Oh my God, I get to do this thing I love. So, my passion, my dopamine's up. They sometimes beat it down and make me change it into something ugly, but whatever, I hand it in and then I get paid for it. So, it's like,

Georgia Yeah, depression.

Matthew LeBaron oh my God, where's the next one? Like it is so similar to, and I can't help but like, it's so similar to like addiction. It's almost a tension addiction, you know? It's fascinating.

Georgia It makes sense. Yeah, no, it totally makes sense. I think it is like an addiction. And I think as I got older and did more work, that's when I realized just after you finish a job, step back, take a little time. You mentioned that you help artists untangle the stories they tell themselves. When a creator is feeling that isolation, you mentioned how does that usually show up in their business or their portfolio before they come to you.

Matthew LeBaron and Okay, so two questions really.

Matthew LeBaron Okay, so I'll work backward. When people reach out to me, the thing I noticed over the last 20 years, which started off as like letters and mail, for the kids listening, they used to these things, pieces of paper with a stamp on them to us before all of this. And we would get a letter and we'd say, this person has written me a letter with their own hands.

Matthew LeBaron Anyway, so, you know, it started with letters and phone calls and emails and then DMs and now everything. There's a trend. It's always, I am this person. This is my work. How do I get to your agency? Right? I am this person. This is my work. How do I get to your agency? That right there tells me such a specific story about somebody. Their work is their identity, and they need somebody to help them find more work, be better at business, review their portfolio. And that's something about the people at my agency. It wasn't about me. It's never about the agent. It's about the artist roster you have. People see those artists, they're like, those artists that I respect are with that agency. That must be a solid agency. Little do they know, that's not always true. But not with me. Not with me, with me, that's always true. But that's like a big thing.

So then once we get to talking, you start to see the story they're telling themselves, right? I'm really busy now, but I'm worried that I'm not going to be busy enough in a month. Now on the surface, that just seems like they're worried about what jobs coming next. But once you do a little digging, you find out there's income insecurity or money management insecurities, or they've got tons of money saved up, but this addiction we talked about makes them think they can never stop because you don't know when the work's going to stop.

Like everybody has their story, but you have to talk with people. You have to really start to ask the right questions and prompt people in the right way to get to that story and dig underneath.

Georgia And I think people forget sometimes that regardless of what side of this business you're on, whether it's agency artist, you know, PR, whatever side of this business I feel like you're on, it's all relationship building.

Matthew LeBaron Yeah. Oh my God. All of it. Every single piece of it you are spot on. And that's why I had an event this past Friday up in the Hudson Valley for queer professionals. And I hesitated calling it networking because the first thing I do is talk about how much I hate networking. We get in a group first, we talk about what this is, and it was basically speed dating and relationship building. So, what we did was we had everybody across from each other and everybody moves left every five minutes. So have five minutes to talk to each other about what you do. Everybody has their QR codes on their phone ready to swap. But what we did after that is what really mattered.

We talked about like, okay, what did you guys like about that? What didn't you like about it? What's something you found out tonight that you were surprised with? What's something that

didn't surprise you? Then people were able to start building relationships because they gravitated towards people who maybe had a shared experience or somebody who had an opposite experience. And so, by the end of the night, everybody's sitting around these couches, we're like playing cards and having, you know, a drink or having some snacks. And all of a sudden it was like 10 o'clock because people were sitting there building relationships, instead of this transactional feeling that networking and you and Julie, our lovely producer, can attest to this, we've all been there.

I used to have to hustle with the books over the agency. Julie's seen my show. Here's the food, here's the books. You guys want to hire us? But we never said that, but it felt transactional. So now I think again, and if I hadn't gone through that, I wouldn't have learned what I learned and know what I know now, that is like relationships matter more than anything. We'll get to the transaction. If you want to hire me, you'll do it. But the more I get to know you and know what your problem you're trying to solve is, then I'll really know if I can help you or if I can't. And I try to teach artists the same thing. Go in with curiosity, learn more about the people you're talking to. The work will come.

Georgia Yeah, that's great advice. Don't focus on the work first, focus on building that relationship.

Matthew LeBaron Yeah. And I think the reason that that probably resonates is because we're in a time of like highly saturated promotion. I don't know about you, but my inbox is full of, "Hey Matthew, quick question. Have you tried this? Is this a pipeline problem that you're having?" So many people with the same AI written promises. And I'm just like, delete, delete, delete. Actually, I'm going to respond and tell you how horrible this sounds. Delete, delete, delete. So, there's a saturation right now of people selling. And I think what is more helpful is to get to know people. People to people, right? Get back into the human side of this business.

Georgia Yes, absolutely. I know you've worked with major brands like Adidas and Starbucks. From a client perspective, how does your focus on an artist, we'll use that word again, wellness. How does focusing on that and their mission lead to a better like say ROI for the brand? Basically is a healthy artist a more profitable partner?

Matthew LeBaron Yeah. Well... Well, I think a healthy artist is a more lucrative production. Like they are going to produce better work if they are in the best possible mental state. Granted, others will argue, and I can attest to this too, how many of us have been, you know, especially in university, you're like a day before things due and you do some of your best work. Terrible habit to learn, but one that a lot of creatives learn, especially freelance creatives. But what we're talking

about is 10-year, freelance creatives brought in by a major brand to do a major campaign. And if they're exhausted, if they are undernourished, if they are mentally unwell or feeling unstable due to a lack of whatever, they're not going to bring the best possible product. So I think someone who is taking care of themselves first will always put their best work forward.

That's not to say that people who are exhausted and like burning the candle at both ends don't also do genius work. We've seen it, right? Like we've made breakthroughs in the world because of that, but it's not sustainable. You're going to burn out; you're going to fizzle. And then you're a different person after that. Somebody mentioned this to me the other day when we were talking about burnout—you almost don't recover from it. You are a changed person after the first burnout and the second and the third, because you start to just lose certain capabilities. Because it's almost like you've injured an arm, right? Like if you ever break your wrist, the wrist recovers, but it's never exactly like it was before you broke it. And burnout seems to do the same thing to people.

Georgia Wow, that's fascinating actually.

Matthew LeBaron Well, I think it's, how could it not, right? It's like that fallacy of catching up on sleep. It's been disproven so many times. You're not catching up on sleep. Ask any parent. You know, like that's not happening. So, I've always tried to figure out a way to describe burnout. And this is the first time I've used that analogy, which I think I'm going to hold onto, because that really does make sense. It is a lot like an injury. You know, you can recover, but you're never that person that you were before.

Georgia We're in an era where an artist can't just be an artist anymore. Artists today have to be a social media manager, a bookkeeper. You have to figure out how to engineer AI. How do you help talent embrace sort of like these CEO roles without losing the creative spark that made them start in the first place?

Matthew LeBaron Love this question. This is like a question for the ages. And I will say this with each one of my clients, whether they are individual talent or freelance or creative leaders who are in these agencies and brands, you help them all by listening to what it is they need and you help them uncover what it is that's missing. What are some of the blocks? Like for a lot of artists right now, AI is a huge block. It feels really horrible to work in a system that seems like it's trying to replace you. But at the same time, we're seeing that if you choose not to, you may still have a successful career, but you may not be able to move as swiftly. And I'm not saying remove the whole art creation.

Let's say I'm an artist who does paper cut work and I'm going to keep to my paper cut work. I'm going to photograph it, do everything the same. My question to them is what is holding you back from automating some of your tasks like outreach, like building a pipeline and funnel into your Gmail through Claude or creating a spreadsheet through Claude that will talk to your Gmail, you know, all of these other things. And what we find out is like there is a values issue. It's against their values to use this thing that they see as detrimental to the world. So rather than convince somebody to try and use something that's against their values, I try to uncover what their values are and help them align their lifestyle to that.

Georgia Ok.

I will never ever tell anybody you have to use AI. I mean, that sounds like Sam Altman. Of course, the guy selling you the product is going to tell you, you need it. Like we've worked in the business of sales and advertising for a long time. This is sales 101. You so need this product. I mean, you guys can't live without it. Yeah, I made it, but yeah, you can't live without it. I'll never tell anybody that, you know? I will say though, if you don't take the time, whether it's with a coach or a mentor or a boss or...

Georgia Right.

Matthew LeBaron to figure out what it is that's that block, why are you being resistant to this thing? You'll never know why. And then without knowing why you can't figure out what's next and how to get through this moment.

So, it's always really helpful to figure out like, what is it that's holding you back? What is it you think you need to be doing? A lot of artists right now, they're like, "I need to be using AI, right?" And I'm like, I'm not answering that. You're the only one who can answer that. I think that, and this goes for leaders as well, that the thing that gets mistaken about coaching oftentimes is that it's like mentorship or therapy where they're going to tell you what to do. The best coaching, the actual coaching happens when you uncover the answers for yourself through the right question asking by the coach. So, I'll never tell anybody they have to use X. It's just not my job, not my lane.

Georgia Right, you really act more like a guide to help people through it.

Matthew LeBaron Yeah, it's a guide with a mirror in his hand. And even me with my coach, whenever I say something and they reflect something back to me, I'm like, "Wait, what?" You don't even know the stuff that's banging around in this monkey mind of ours half the time until

you say it out loud and someone's like, "Okay, here's what you just said." And you're like, huh, it's actually quite enlightening.

Georgia Speaking of AI, since we're seeing it move further into creative space at lightning-fast speed, when you're coaching talent, how do you help them find that line between using AI as a tool for efficiency and protecting the humanity of their work?

Matthew LeBaron That's an interesting question because the idea that I helped them find the line is like a little bit askew. I actually guide them to the value that's being challenged. Again, it really is about understanding what is it about this new tool? Let's say it's AI. Let's say even go back to Photoshop. You remember when Photoshop first came out and photographers were like, "No way."

Georgia Yeah.

Matthew LeBaron You know, then look what happened. Digital cameras as well. Remember film photographers when digital came out, they were like, I'm not using that. Cut to banner ads two years later and everybody having to make these awful things. But I think it's really about understanding what is it that is being challenged here, right? If you want to be efficient and still hold on to your craft, what is it that you can do to do that? Again, we have all these answers—just there's stuff in the way

So in my role, again, whether it's an individual artist or a leader who's trying to run an agency and figure out how do we utilize AI in an ethical way, in a way that protects our clients, and in a way that helps my team stay creative and original, they're both asking the same question. And I think it really comes out in the discussions that we have. And for instance, is like some artists, want to make their process more efficient, but they're afraid of galvanizing their follower base, their fear of being, pitchforked by their creative community because like everything in the ether these days, it's so black and white. You're either with us or you're against us. And for those listening, that's a terrible way to live. We just need to try and hear each other out.

Georgia Right.

Matthew LeBaron I just had a panel at SVA with their senior class, some digital creatives and actual faculty. And the talk was AI and creativity. That's it. It wasn't AI and creativity, you should use it, but the amount of emails they got were wild of like, can't believe you're doing this. I'm so

glad you're doing this. How dare you guys embrace AI this way? Why did you guys take this long to embrace it? You know, like everybody has this like this position on it.

But like most things, I think you need to try and hear the other side of it because look, there are some artists out there who've been working for 20, 30 years. This is their life. And if they hadn't made a shift to AI, they wouldn't be able to feed their kids or take care of that sick parent. You need to understand what's going on for people. And that only happens through discourse and conversation. It doesn't happen by assuming everyone's the devil because they're using AI.

Georgia Right, to your point about things being black and white, most people live in that gray zone, right? I mean, there's always shades of things going on.

Matthew LeBaron We live in it more than we think, you know? I just think we reside there more than we want to admit, because then everybody's afraid of being wrong, right?

Georgia Yeah. That's interesting.

Matthew LeBaron I wake up every day knowing I'm wrong. It makes life so much easier. I'm just wrong about everything. So much easier.

Georgia That's funny. I know one area that has been particularly challenging for me is social media, because I'm not a fan. And I've also kind of become bored with it. But I think what makes social media difficult to navigate is that artists are often told they must be content creators first and artists second to stay relevant.

Matthew LeBaron Hmm.

Georgia How do you help your talent navigate that sort of treadmill of social media?

Matthew LeBaron If I had my way, we would burn social media to the ground and never allow it to happen ever again. Aside from the ability to connect with people for things like activism and social health, but we don't use it for that. It's used as like an attention economy, comparison politics, a place to shout at people.

So, with all that said, for the talent that I work with, and again, this goes for individual artists and leaders, because now they're expected to be thought leaders, so, they need to be on social media. I just, again, go back to the values thing. Do you want to be there? No, not really. Then why are we doing this? Well, I need to make a living and I'm going to fall behind if I don't. Okay. How can we do this while also remaining as closely aligned to your values as possible?

So, for some artists, they're like, I refuse to show my process. No fucking way. Like I've worked my ass off on this. People don't need to see my process. Cool. But again, if we're working under the, I need to be on social media, maybe you could do some time-lapse in your studio of you hustling around and doing your thing. No, I don't want people seeing my studio either. Cool. Maybe you could become a thought leader. What is some, 10 pieces of advice you could give to emerging artists right now. There's always some way of contributing to this wheel that we have to be in.

But if we go through all that and artists like, still don't want to be on social media. And I'm like, great, then let's do this. Let's get you some speaking engagements. Let's start positioning you as somebody who hosts workshops for agencies. Maybe you go into a creative agency, and you show them how to work with cut cardboard letters before you commit to any type. Maybe you do a workshop on how to maintain work-life balance as a creative in a high demanding industry. There's just so many ways in which to get yourself out there that I think to tell people that you have to be on social anymore is becoming a bit of a farce because again, even that is so oversaturated. And it's happening faster and faster, every time we hit a piece of media that becomes super popular,

Georgia Right.

Matthew LeBaron The saturation level happened so quickly. It took us like 10 years for Instagram to become the influencer economy it did. Right? At first, we were all posting pictures of our food and cute buildings we liked and cats. That was me. And then it became, how do we use this to monetize whatever we're working on in our business? What you've seen now is like, Substack blew up in the last year. It didn't take 10 years; it took a year. Now everybody's got a Substack. Podcasts took like five years, right?

Georgia Right.

Matthew LeBaron And now podcasts are super popular. Talking heads are super popular. Everything that happens tends to happen quickly and get saturated. So, I just say, yes, you can contribute to that. And it's not lost to me that we're on a podcast. You can contribute to that, but you can also go find other ways to reach people. Because what happens is if there's a lot of noise

going on over here and people can't get their hand above that, hey, look at me. And there's like this lower, like smaller pool over there and everybody's getting exhausted with that. Go up there. Try that thing. You know, there's a lot of ways in which you can get your name out there. Social media doesn't run the world. It may feel like it does, but I've actually spent the last two years really reducing my time on social media, little by little to change my habits. And I've got to say, it's opened me up to other areas to look. There's so much more going on in this world than on this stupid brick that I just want to throw.

Georgia I love that. I like the way you look at it. For someone like me, like I said, especially who doesn't really care for social media, there's other things you can be doing. You don't have to just focus on social media.

Matthew LeBaron Yeah, and to be honest, think the reason the promise of Instagram that got us all hooked is it felt like community, but now we're starting to realize it's fast food of community. It's not real community. You don't build real relationships there. They may start there, but I highly urge you to take them off that platform and then do the work. And there is work. There's no community without work. It is all work. The village doesn't get built by itself and the villagers all need to do their fair share.

Georgia Yeah.

Matthew LeBaron So I want to be clear that it's not about like, I'm going to get off Instagram, build a community. No, takes like, things take work, y'all. Like it's, this thing just makes it feel easy because you open it up, you scroll, you scroll, and that's easy. And of course it doesn't mean anything. It's too easy for it to mean anything.

Georgia Yeah, exactly. That's a great observation. I think a lot of people are finally starting to kind of, even businesses I think are starting to finally get that through their head that just because there's commentary going on, on whatever it is, Instagram, TikTok, that doesn't really necessarily mean it's important for your business and that you have to be in that space.

Matthew LeBaron Yeah. And I want to be clear. I, I do work with influencers as well. You know, one of my goals in working with influencers is the same goals that I have working with creative artists, talent, and leaders: I want them to live more holistic lives. I want them to be happier. You know, these people need our help just as much as everybody else. We all need each other. Like

influencers aren't the problem. The problem is the economy that got created from this. Because once you start making money off something, you can't stop making money off it. It's hard. It's really difficult. It's a difficult situation that we're all in.

Georgia Yeah. I'm going to back up because earlier you were talking about artists saying yes to whatever job comes their way because they're so afraid of losing that job. Are there a couple, two or three like non-negotiables you think every independent artist needs to have in their business toolkit, whether it's how they pitch, sticking to their rate or how they handle their billing, whatever it is.

Matthew LeBaron There are so many. Funny enough, I have a non-negotiables post coming out and I have like five top non-negotiables.

One is schedule. Make sure the schedule is doable. Don't say you can do something if the schedule doesn't allow it, because you're just going to deliver a subpar piece of work or collection of work.

Second is the contract. Do not do anything without a contract. I don't care if it's your best friend's mom's beauty company. Actually, especially if it's your best friend's mom's beauty company. Whether it's that or whether it's AT&T, get a contract. You are being asked to produce work for somebody, they should have some formal obligation to pay you for it in the form of a written contract, whatever that may be. It doesn't have to be, you know, 20 pages and like have a two-page contract. Reach out to me. Anybody who needs a contract, you can reach out to me. I'll help you write a contract.

Georgia That's great.

Matthew LeBaron Yeah. Understand the license, the use, how the deliverables you're making are being used.

Have an AI clause. Your work cannot be used for any machine learning or training any AI to reproduce this style of work without your prior written consent and money. Must pay me for that period.

Georgia Yeah, that's important.

Matthew LeBaron I think after the last two years, if we haven't learned that much at all, like you're doing yourself a huge disservice to not have an AI clause in your work. That goes for freelance creatives of any type, freelancers of any type, anybody handing people your work that you have busted your ass to do. It has to exist.

And with that, you also must disclose any time you're using AI. You can get, not only in trouble yourself, but you can really get your clients in trouble. If you're using AI to make something and have not disclosed it and it later comes back to bite them in the ass.

And then last but not least a kill fee. Back when we started doing this, you never worried about a job getting killed. Once you had the PO or the contract, the job happened and you got paid. Now we've got things happening where we had like an 80 grand job start of the year. We were supposed to take the call for this job and my client went quiet. Two weeks passed, finally got a hold of them and they were like, yeah, we had to go in a different direction. We found out the day before the call. And I'm like, Oh - so you didn't tell me that the day before the call? I just saw Julie hang her head in the producer's booth. Because she knows, she knows it's not what you do. Like that's not the, that's so unprofessional. And it was a bummer too, because it was a client we've worked with before, which made it cut even deeper.

Matthew LeBaron I will say this, that client was extremely receptive to my response and my displeasure about that. So, I feel better going back to them, but all that to say, that wasn't even awarded yet. So I digress, but any job where like you're putting in work and you know, let's say you get to the sketch phase and they cancel it and you don't have a kill fee, I mean, you could try and get money, but it's better to have it in writing. So right under that AI, the AI clause, have a kill fee in there, you know?

I think overall though, like when it comes to non-negotiables, just think about what is the best way for you to protect your time. What is the best way for you to protect your time? And the same goes for leaders, know, like they should be protecting their creative team's time. How do I protect the time? Because time is our most valuable asset, right? It's how we get things done.

Georgia Since you've mentioned that artists are now doing a lot of their own heavy lifting on social media and project management, what are the two or three specific tools or apps you find yourself recommending most often to help them stay organized?

Matthew LeBaron I think community is a tool, I know that it's not an app and it's not something you can like download, but the artists that I know who've built strong communities around them, let's say they get together with other three or four other artists every week and they all do a happy hour drawing session where they're drawing just for themselves and not for a client. And while they're doing that, they're having a conversation and maybe an adult beverage, or once a week

they get together and they all talk about contracts. What are some things that they're struggling with? Or they get on a Zoom and they do an admin happy hour like we offer. There's a couple of apps for it, but you don't need an app. We've been coming together as community. That's how we evolved like as humans, we know how to do this, it's in us. So, I think that's another great tool.

And then I would say any kind of tool, any kind of app that allows you to pause and slow down and that can remind you to take breaks is a fantastic thing to have. I'm sure the question was really aimed at optimization, but I've gotten really anti-optimization lately, because I feel like we're missing so much of our life when we over optimize. And personally, I've spent the last three years learning how to meditate, only to find out you don't learn how to meditate, you just do it. But it's also, allowed me to slow down a lot. And so, I oftentimes ask, especially when I'm onboarding a new client, artist, leader, what's your downtime look like? When are you ever taking a break? When do you have no phone time? Do you have a no phone time in your day? Those things are important. So yeah, any app, like I think Headspace, there's like a mindfulness app.

Georgia You just do it, yeah.

Matthew LeBaron Dan Harris has 10%, which is like goes along with his podcast 10% Happier, which is like, I'm a 10 % Happier evangelist. I love the people he has on there. Yeah, it's just really good to help—just think something to get you to slow down.

Georgia I'll have to check that out. I think you're right. It's not always about, like you said, optimizing your work time. It's about trying to get your day in a space where you have time to just be and clear your head. I know I've been trying to get into a practice of drawing first thing in the morning or just doing something quick like sketching.

Matthew LeBaron Yeah. That's the artist way 101. That book, if you're familiar with the book by Julie Cameron, you know, *Morning Pages* it's like the biggest thing you start with is 30 days of writing for free form writing every day for 30 days. And then she takes you through this process of like nurturing creativity in the morning. I've got a 6.30 AM to 8 AM block where I don't touch my phone. I draw, I write, I do my own thing. I get outside or get some air or do some workout movement.

Matthew LeBaron Because look, what the hell is going on between 6.30 and eight that I need to be attached to my phone? what is your phone going to do for you first thing in the morning?

Georgia I like that. So the last question in this section focusing on like the artist landscape: It used to be that the pinnacle for an artist, say like a stylist like me, was shooting either a major ad campaign or becoming a director at a legacy fashion title. While those are still huge wins, are they still the ultimate milestone or have goals shifted for artists?

Matthew LeBaron Hmm. Can I blow your mind?

Georgia sure!

Matthew So, I was talking with another artist about this recently. What if that pinnacle didn't exist? What if the pinnacle really is sustainability? A practice where your reputation compounds over time, where that ownership, that's what you get. You know, cause that's what I coach now. It's not really like, let's get you the Adidas job. Or I mean, for most artists, it's the Nike job. So, what are some of your client goals? I really want to work for Nike. And I'm like, cool, I can definitely make that happen. But I got to warn you, that's going to happen and you're going to realize like life's not all of a sudden changed and you are not that bitch, as we say. But yeah, I just think what I try to coach people is ownership over what you do.

And once you have that, you can start to build a sustainable career of longevity, of being able to adapt. And in your instance, what kind of styling was it? Fashion styling?

Georgia I was doing fashion, fashion styling, mostly on model.

Matthew LeBaron Yeah. So, like you said, so that trajectory was fashion styling, then you'd get to that pinnacle client, then what? Well, then you become an expert and an authority and maybe you start writing. And then maybe you start coaching other stylists. Maybe you start...

debunking the styling world. Hey, I've been behind this curtain for so many years. Here's everything that needs to change in order for this to go in a better direction. Or you pivot completely and you're like, I'm going to do food styling. I got everything I wanted out of fashion styling. That kind of strength that people show when they pivot, when they're an expert in one thing and they decide to pivot, I just think that's such a boss move, right? Like, you know, it's just like, I'm going to try something new. Life's too short, right? This building something sustainable and that sustainable thing is you.

Matthew LeBaron That sounds too woo-woo. I mean, it's true.

Georgia No! I do think being able to say, OK, I have this body of knowledge and I'm going to take what I've learned and add to it or create some things new from it. I think you take everything with you.

Matthew LeBaron Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And speaking more to the pivot too, because you mentioned this is something you're looking at, I always tell people like, have idea number one, have plan number one, but plan B, turn everything from plan A on its head. Completely pivot to something absolutely different.

What's the, Oh I wish I had tried in your life. There's something that's like been in the background. I wish I. For me, it was like, I thought I wanted to be a lawyer when I was really young. That's because I love arguing and I thought that's what it was. But, you know, what's the thing you wanted to do, right? And then just put it down on paper. Take like a day. See what that looks like. See what that feels like to see. Look at that paper written there and be like, Matthew LeBaron at Law. And so again, you have your plan A, you know, you have the path that before you but consider other paths—life's too short. There's so much cool stuff we could be doing.

Georgia Yeah, Yeah.

Matthew LeBaron Knowing also, sorry, want to, sorry, one caveat, we still have to pay bills and operate within capitalism and pay mortgages and student loans and feed our kids. I do not take that for granted. I just think that has become too much of like, I can't try Option B because of all that. I dispelled that in my coaching a lot. We figure out ways you can do both.

Georgia That's great. I think that's really important because I think people can start to feel like you're saying, kind of like almost trapped.

Matthew LeBaron My God, it's the equivalent of golden handcuffs. Yeah, totally.

Georgia As we start to wrap up our conversation, which has been amazing, Matthew, if we look five years down the road, do you think the title artist will even exist in the same way or will everyone be like a creative entrepreneur or creative consultant by default? How should a student graduating today prepare for what's coming in the world?

Matthew LeBaron Well, one, I've been exposed to quite a few students lately. Like I said, I've been doing those panels at SVA. I did a bunch of student discussions last spring, the spring of 25, and talked to a lot of them. And then I'm also coaching through this new group called Paradiso that helps coach leaders, emerging creators, everybody. And the one constant that I keep coming back to is how dare you even try to look five years down the road right now?

We have no idea what five weeks from now looks like. I will say this. I don't think creative artist is ever going to disappear. I think if somebody told us in 1995 that there'd be a thing called influencers, we'd be like, what the fuck are you talking about? There's always going to be some new word for what we do. There's always going to be somebody repackaging what has been done for eons in creativity. And you can call it whatever you want.

What I think is most important is that we stay true to the creative process ourselves, still get our hands dirty and still be in community with each other and learn from each other. Now, whatever you call that, that's entirely up to the industry really. I mean, it's not even up to us. This industry has made all these terms. I mean, and Julie will shake her head in the producer booth. It was like art buyer, creative buyer, creative producer, integrated producer, and it's been the same person. I know someone specifically who went through that whole trajectory. And she's now an integrated producer. And she was an art buyer when I first met her 20 years ago, and she's doing the same job.

Georgia Isn't that funny? It's all just these buzzwords.

Matthew LeBaron It's wild. Totally. It's all buzzwords. And look, I could go into Claude after this and be like, hey, what do you think an illustrator is going to be in like five years? And even Claude might be like, it'd probably still be an illustrator. I don't know what you're talking about.

Georgia so funny. I think it's so true, though. It's just hype, trends, buzzwords, the whole thing. It just moves faster now because of all the social media, I think.

Matthew LeBaron Yeah, And that's, think even harkening back to what I said earlier about spending less time on your brick, don't get so caught up in it. Focus on your relationships, focus on the people around you, focus on yourself. Cause I think the oxygen mask analogy is really important nowadays. Like put your mask on first. You've got to take care of yourself. You cannot heal the world, help people, do your job, be a parent, be a friend, or be a community member if you're not taking care of yourself.

Georgia Absolutely, absolutely. And following up on that, you've talked a lot about social health and not being an island. So, for the artists listening who is currently feeling invisible or burnt out, what is one small non-business action they can take this week to reconnect with their why?

Matthew LeBaron So, for the artist who is feeling isolated, my best advice to you is to reach out to another creative, somebody you admire, somebody who admires you, maybe find a group of creatives and take that first very scary step of reaching out and being vulnerable and it will reap rewards. That's literally the best advice I can give anybody. That goes for everybody, not just creatives.

Georgia Like you said earlier, get off your brick, get off your phone and reach out to somebody.

Matthew LeBaron I mean, like use it to send the message because how else are we going to do it? But maybe send a letter.

Georgia Sure. Yeah, you could send a letter.

Matthew LeBaron Actually, I'm going to get both of your addresses. You're both getting letters from me. That's it.

Georgia I can't wait to get a letter from you. So, last question. In a world of infinite scrolling and AI generated content, what is the one human quality that still makes a brand stop and pay attention to an artist's work?

Matthew LeBaron Well, first, I hate talking about brands like they're people. So, I would say somebody working for a brand who might be scrolling and what would stop them is something that has a human quality that sticks out amidst all of the AI medium slop of, this is the one hook you need to get somebody's attention. Just know that like, being yourself is always going to be the best thing you could do. Because even if it doesn't stop them, at least you're not faking it, at least you're just being you, you know? And I just think if you follow the you path, only good things can come of it. There's this idea in coaching of energy attracts like energy. And I think the more we start acting like schlocky hook driven people, like that's what we're going to attract. And then your next thing you know, you're going to be like, I'm doing all this work that doesn't really align with who I am. So, that's the best advice I could give.

Georgia Yeah, I love that. That's great. Actually, I lied. I'm to ask you one more question do you have anything coming up or anything that you want to tell an artist to reach out to you for? I want to give you a chance to to tell us a little bit about what we can do a shameless plug, but I do like know what people.

Matthew LeBaron Is this shameless plug time? I couldn't possibly. Okay, here's what I've got going on.

Georgia I do like to let people have an opportunity to tell me what they've got coming up because I do think they could follow you then.

Matthew LeBaron Well, thank you for asking. I have a couple of things I would love to shamelessly plug. One, we always have a free intro call for anybody, whether you're a creative leader, illustrator, somebody trying to pivot, somebody who's got a team or a group they're managing, learning and development. I take 30-minute calls six times a week that are in my calendar. They are unmovable and those slots get full every week of new conversations. And if nothing comes of it, I still get to talk to new people. So, it's great.

In addition to that, on our resources page of our website, much-creative.com, you can go to our monthly experiences. These are free experiences where I try to bring people in community together with no paywall, no anything. This is just things that are passionate for me. So, Monday mornings, we have an 8.30 a.m. meditation for five minutes virtually for anybody who's trying to meditate. Then we come on, I do a meditation, we go. It's just a great way to set up our week.

I have an admin happy hour twice a month. That is like take anything you've been putting off and just come to the admin happy hour. We will all state our intentions. I'll put on some background music. I'll be there if people have questions, but ultimately even I'm doing stuff like bill paying or invoicing or whatever. And then there is the bi-monthly money management calls that we're—which Julie, I told you about this—those are with a bookkeeper that works with creatives and freelancers. So, he's helping us get better at managing our money.

And just pay attention to my Instagram. I post a lot about other opportunities to either free advisement and information and tips, and then like events that are happening.

Georgia Okay, so you've already mentioned your website and otherwise if people want to reach out to you, it best to DM you like on LinkedIn, Instagram?

Matthew LeBaron I would say LinkedIn for the professional stuff. And it's Matthew LeBaron. And then I have the connector in parentheses just to set me apart from the other LeBarons. And that's what I do. Like I connect people and I connect people to their things and all that stuff.

Georgia Yep, awesome. Matthew, thank you so much. This was a great conversation. I enjoyed speaking with you.

Matthew LeBaron Yeah, same. I wish I could start my Mondays with this kind of conversation all the time. Maybe that's what I'll do. I'll just have a conversation with people every Monday and call it a podcast that never gets launched.

Georgia Listen, that probably would be an awesome podcast.

Matthew LeBaron Probably, right? Because there'd be no pressure to perform. I will say this, I want to thank you for having me and for absolutely zero pressure to perform. This felt like a really natural conversation and I'm excited to see what the end result is.

Georgia Aww, well thank you. Thank you.

Thank you so much for joining us. I'm your host, Georgia Alexia Benjou. This podcast was produced by Julie Bassignani of Jabber Production. Theme music and audio post production by Coupe Studios Music and Sound Design. If you like what you heard, leave us a 5 star review and share with a friend and be sure to follow this podcast so you don't miss any upcoming episodes.

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