

The  
**LIFE**  
freestyle  
QuaranZINE

THE LIFE IS A FREESTYLE QUARANZINE

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Alex

C.Shreve

Doc Mofo

GREGNWMN

i. the cool

Lady Zay

Onaje Tha Artizt

Senza Infinite

Sly Watts

StubbyKas

The Last Maven

(a group of MCs, apprentices in the Society of Spoken Art)

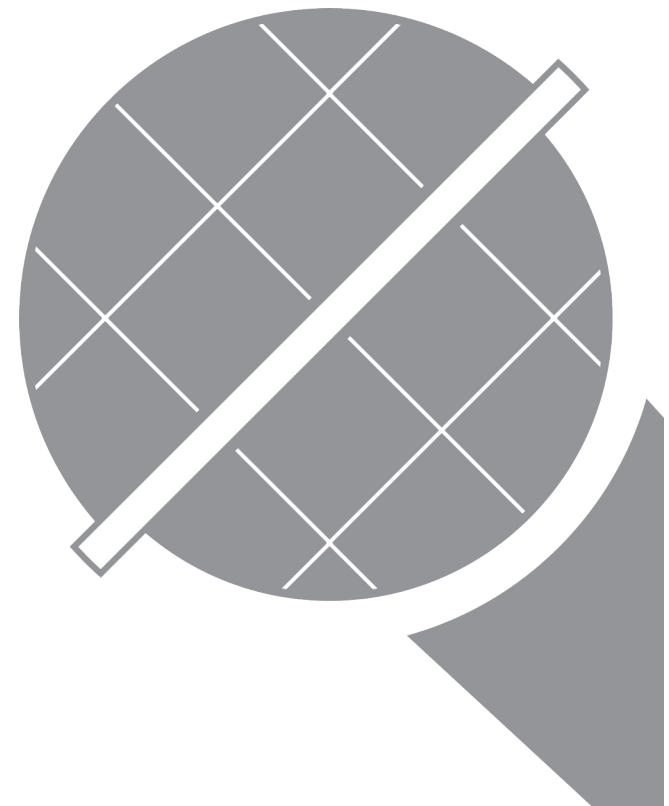
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# LIFE IS A FREESTYLE

*is not just a tagline, not just a fancy phrase. It's a conceptual metaphor à la George Lakoff & Mark Turner, who argue metaphor is pervasive and "Because they lead us to new ways of conceiving of our world, [rappers] are artists of the mind." Both major ideas about FREESTYLE are here: that it's a rapper's own, unconstrained style, and that it's off the top, spontaneous. Consider LIFE for now as human life experience, cycles of recurrence within it.*

**The freestyler** → a person living life.

**The context of freestyling** (for instance a cypher) → the context of life.

*An entailment: Like freestyling, life is social; we have to listen to others.*

**The indefinite length of a freestyle** → the indefinite length of a life.

**The freestyler's deviating from expectations** → a person living similarly.

*Entailment: This can be done in beautiful ways.*

**The beat to which a freestyler raps** → the progress of time during our lives.

*Entailment: Life, like the beat, is external, not directly under our control.*

*Entailment: If the beat is provided by a beatboxer or by a sympathetic DJ who extends a breakbeat indefinitely, that's like some amount of time we can control with the help of others: The duration of a project we and others decide to work on, for instance.*

*Entailment: A beat provided by a track or playlist, or by a DJ who is antagonistically changing up the beat, is like some unit of time we cannot directly control, maybe a week or an imposed schedule. Maybe something like a pandemic changes up the beat?*

**A verse** → a higher-level cycle of accomplishment, with build-up and release, within life. For instance, a whole project or a year with plans and resolutions.

**A bar** (or a pair of rhyming bars) → a lower-level cycle of accomplishment, with build-up and release, within one of life's higher-level cycles. For instance, a day within a project, or month within a year.

**Dropping a gem** → a particularly successful lower-level cycle. Cooking a meal, as you regularly do? You cooked a really awesome meal this time!

**Reading the room** to figure out what types of topic matter, tone, flow, and rhymes will be best appreciated by the people around you → contextual and situational awareness in life.

**Keeping the dice rolling**, even if some rhymes are better and some worse → persisting through life's cycles and routines, even though each day may not be equally good.

**Blacking out** → having a powerful intuition about how to live your life, moment to moment, that allows you to take ethical and effective actions without thinking about it.

You got this zine because:

- ☐ You contributed
- ☐ You are part of SOSA with us, IT
- ☐ You are quoted or mentioned (thank you!)
- ☐ We would love something in exchange
- ☐ You gave us something in exchange
- ☐ You are a rapper and/or poet we admire
- ☐ It came to you through a shop or zine library
- ☐ You downloaded it (check that box yourself?)
- ☐ A friend downloaded it and printed it for you

## LATE BREAKING BARS

I was reading *The Times* when I had a time dream  
Enabled me to come up with a new rhyme scheme  
& I imagine that we broke into a new timeline  
A world where I can make my own rhymes mine  
Years ago I felt like I was in times endin'  
I'm in the circle now & I'm rhyme sendin'  
Lotsa work to do but we have the time  
Bend it hard now & we can make everything rhyme

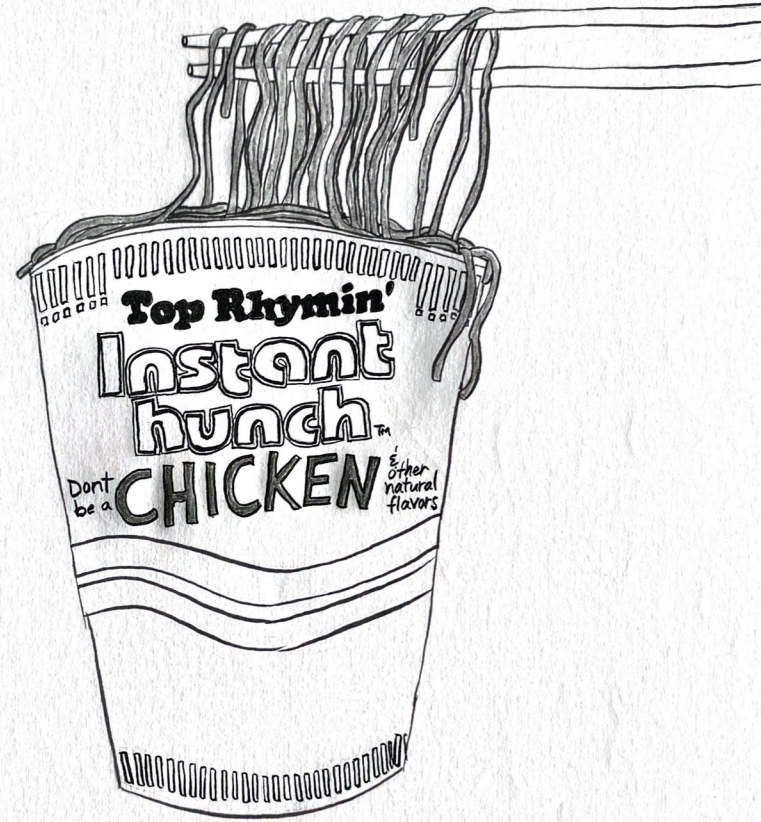
—Doc Mofo, November 7, 2020



## ACTUAL FACTUAL NATURAL FRACTALS, YO

Life...pours in unconstrained directions  
 Style is expression, freedom is a blessin'  
 We can get the lesson misapplied to individuals  
 But this is not related just to vitamins and minerals  
 Spirit here is critical, animism shows  
 The force of life can permeate even what no-one knows  
 Limited intelligence will have us look for eyes  
 But this is so irrelevant to what's beyond the skies  
 See matter is disguise, the energy is mo'-real  
 The body that encapsulates it's like an auto-mobile  
 Constraint is like a gridlock...  
 LIFE IS A FREESTYLE, drifting through a big lot  
 Carving a signature into the con-crete; no need to com-pete  
 Your life will be com-plete even if it's non-streak  
 Meaning is in the macro, facts over feelings  
 A style when it's free pushes life through the ceilings

—StubyKas



*LadyZay IT.*

Based on something I have been eating frequently during the quarantine...

Off the top rhymin  
 Is kind of like Top Ramen  
 Food for the noggin.

Use your noodle to figure out all the implications of this one!



# Reading the Room

When it comes to freestyle, reading the room is an essential practice. It's a form of situational awareness that greatly affects maneuverability as an emcee and as a man. As I enter certain establishments and situations, I instinctively analyze the environment because this will determine the actions that follow.

For example, when at a restaurant, will I be more comfortable being stared at inside while I wait for my food or will I be better off just waiting outside? Can I touch the miscellaneous items left around for customer engagement or should I stand there anxious and inactive just so they won't think I'll steal? When waiting in line and an older white woman cuts in front of me should I say something? Will the combination of my irritation and vernacular come off as ghetto? Will I be another example of why they don't like people like me? Do I just let it slide? Even though people like me have been letting it slide for centuries? Which version of me am I allowed to be at this moment? The version with a bachelor's degree that speaks to White people like I grew up in THEIR neighborhood? Or the version that doesn't mention a degree because it shouldn't matter if I have one for you to treat me with respect? When we protest and see an excessive use of force by those sworn to protect and serve, can I help de-escalate the situation? Will I be handcuffed and paraded down the street or will I never see my son again? The answers elude me.

Life is indeed a freestyle, but who says that freestyling is easy? Freedom is a luxury that everyone isn't allotted. Every moment is layered with decisions. What kind of decisions do we need to make to really be free?

—The Last Maven

LIFE IS NOT WRITTEN

LIFE IS NOT A BOX

LIFE IS NOT A CHOKEHOLD

LIFE IS NOT A COMMANDMENT

LIFE IS NOT FATE

LIFE IS NOT A REHEARSAL

whatchu expect?/  
sun rose from the west/  
trees burned down and the stars  
moved Left/  
embodiement of L's in the flesh/  
innocence fLed/  
satan on the steps/  
peeking through the bLinds but  
i'LL be hard to find/  
i escape in a sLeep state hidden  
in the mind/  
written and defined/  
a visitor of time/

—i. the cool



Play it!

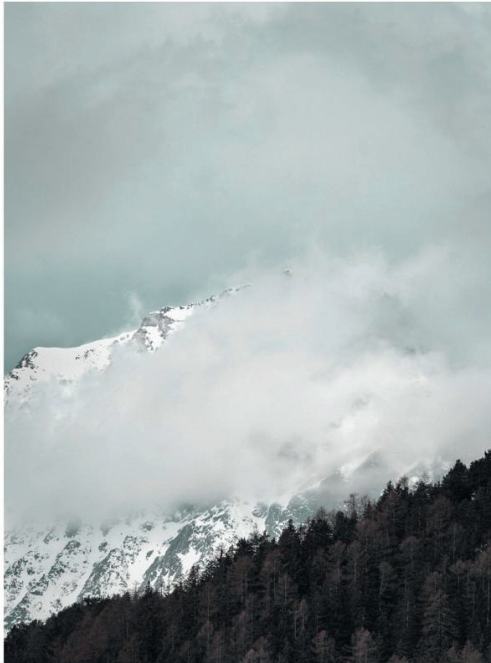
—Senza Infinite

Life is a free style Life is a free style



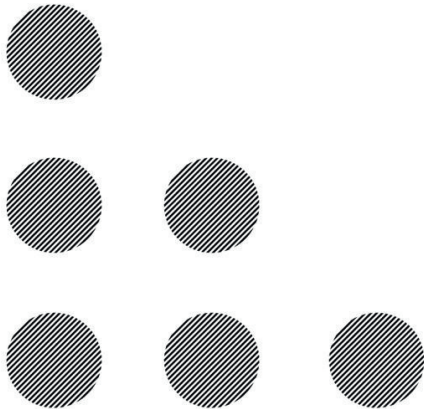


## EMPLOY, NEW PLANS



Windows Are Books,  
& how interesting it is to  
read what otherwise can be  
seen,  
As ideas colliding & residing  
within seeds that were  
shook,  
& shaken from the trees that  
mirror the bells on wreaths,  
That scatter across scenes  
so perhaps the Heat Is A  
Cook,  
With shade combinations &  
paired illuminations,  
Carried along the wind,  
perhaps the Wind Is A Hook,  
A melody arranged that  
ironically took,  
Numerous chord  
progressions still projecting  
while we look,  
I see chapters in the soil,  
Where top-layers are  
conveyors of the superficial  
toil,  
The aforementioned seeds  
alliterated into oils,  
Separated & boiled,  
Down into paragraphs where  
we punctuate the royals,  
The we's & the I's heat the  
surface from the sky,  
In this greenhouse oven  
where the maps made of  
foil,  
Indentations shadow these  
new indignations,  
Watch us move the  
presentations of our mood to  
reach until the lights  
consumed,  
Epilogues with misty rules  
build catalogs with morning  
dew,  
Fresh with ink from paper  
scans,  
Where storytellers are the  
Plants...

↓ THE POWER TO DESTROY



#NowWeMirrorNature  
GREGNWMN

LIES IN THE HANDS

Back in the spring, I was selected to compete in the End of the Weak MC Challenge, a rap competition largely focused on freestyling, in New York City. Things have been on hold with the pandemic, but my training has continued and I've been thoroughly examining my own approach to freestyle rap.

As I see it, a style that is free would be one that is free from rigid structure, free from preconceptions, and essentially free to explore. A style that is allowed to breathe, let's say. A use of free space to move and play within and without constructs.

My freestyle approach in rap cyphers has largely been stream of thought, free form improvisation with or without rhythm. My go-to is what most would consider "freestyling" or going "off the top." You quickly see in a cypher, however, that preconceived written bars can work exceedingly well also. They have an extra polish and punch to them—"throwing your darts" in Wu-Tang terminology. When you witness someone tear through some of their best work to a beat or situation that just happened to work out in that moment, it feels just as surreal—and sometimes even more so than a moment of raw improvisation.

Does a freestyle need to be deliberately timely and of the moment in order to feel improvised? Sometimes it feels like just going off into your own mental space isn't really going to resonate with an audience. Being able to utilize the physical space and current event relevance can be a difference maker. Watch the "freestyles" that Common does at his live shows that incorporate streets and landmarks from the city he's playing in along with timely current events. Does preparing extensively and having more to pull from (and maybe even writing some bars to throw in) make it any less of a freestyle? Or any less impressive in the moment? Does it matter to anyone besides hip hop heads?

Does the need to demonstrate improvisational capability outweigh the artist's desire to show their creations? If you've ever seen a rapper try so hard to put together a set of bars off the top that they simply can't, meaning the difficulty was high enough that it literally disrupted their flow state, this was their mind creating something that their mouth couldn't deliver. Could they have pulled back a notch on complexity and allowed performance more focus?

A creation, is very often a style of its own, a one of one.

As I attempt to dissect my own freestyles and to improve on my own ability to mix in punch lines utilizing physical space and situational awareness, I also must find ways to simply go with the flow and allow things to fall where they may. Some of the illest freestyles are just a matter of getting out of your own way.

If that doesn't make sense, my bad, I was just freestyling.

—C.Shreve "The Professor"

I ran into her on the street  
 She was was rather unique  
 I caught her walkin to the beat  
 I thought her flava was sweet  
 She kinda wowed me  
 Her style free  
 Hard to contain  
 Run thru my brain  
 Like the Nile be  
 Flow was insane  
 The way she spoke, \*ehum\*  
 Made a lot of brothas choke  
 When they tried to impress  
 You either got her or you dont  
 Like a joke made her hard to ingest (in jest)  
 She got me hot  
 Had my stomach in knots  
 Not a lot a time to pick-up lines  
 I had to drop it on the spot  
 Before I lost her  
 Or missed my cue  
 Her spontaneity was new to me  
 But shit got thru  
 Was like the flu the way I caught her vibe  
 Hard to describe  
 Somethin' about her  
 Flowered somethin' outta me  
 Doubted me  
 Til the conversation started sproutin  
 Picture this, photogenic was the synthesis  
 I had her focused  
 She got me open, like a lotus  
 Added somethin to my repertoire  
 Yea think thats what I met 'er for  
 —Onaje Tha Artizt

```

# Stem Tracks, by Alex
#
# I was exploring random walks and text worms to visualize
# lyrics, using rhyme patterns to nudge the tracks. I ended up
# with something that started looking like flowering vines, where
# more flowery sections corresponded with more dense rhyming in a
# bar, or bars. Below is pseudo-code for generating these
# patterns, in which "bars" are the text lyrics from two points
# in time: Run DMC's Graffiti Rock Freestyle (1984) and
# Black Thought's Funk Flex Freestyle (2017).

```

```

xi = 0
yi = 0
endSyllables = ['']

```

```

for bar in bars:

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    # break down each bar into syllable windows and
    # determine if they rhyme with the end syllables
    # in the previous bar
    for syllables in bar:

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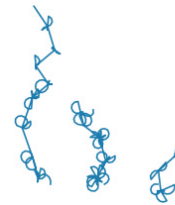
        # if they rhyme, circle back to the point
        # where the end syllables occurred
        if rhyme(syllables, endSyllables) == True:
            xi, yi = circleBack(xEnd, yEnd)
        # if they don't rhyme, wander to a new point
        else:
            xi, yi = wander(xi, yi)

```

```

    # at the end of the bar, indicate new end
    # syllables and mark that point on the track
    endSyllables = syllables[:]
    xEnd = xi
    yEnd = yi

```



```

# Run DMC, 1984. Graffiti Rock Freestyle.

```



```

# Black Thought, 2017. Funk Flex Freestyle.

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Traveling in the slam poetry circuits that actually resonates with me a lot. I would do a lot of cyphers outside of the initial competition where people just kind of went with what they felt. People just kind of went with the flow. And I feel like life is a freestyle. It's kind of this whole, life is unpredictable, you make it up as you go, you flow in there just like a freestyle. There are going to be times when you're hitting it and there are going to be times when you can't come up with anything. But either way the flow is going on, the beat is still popping."

—Christopher Coward, game designer



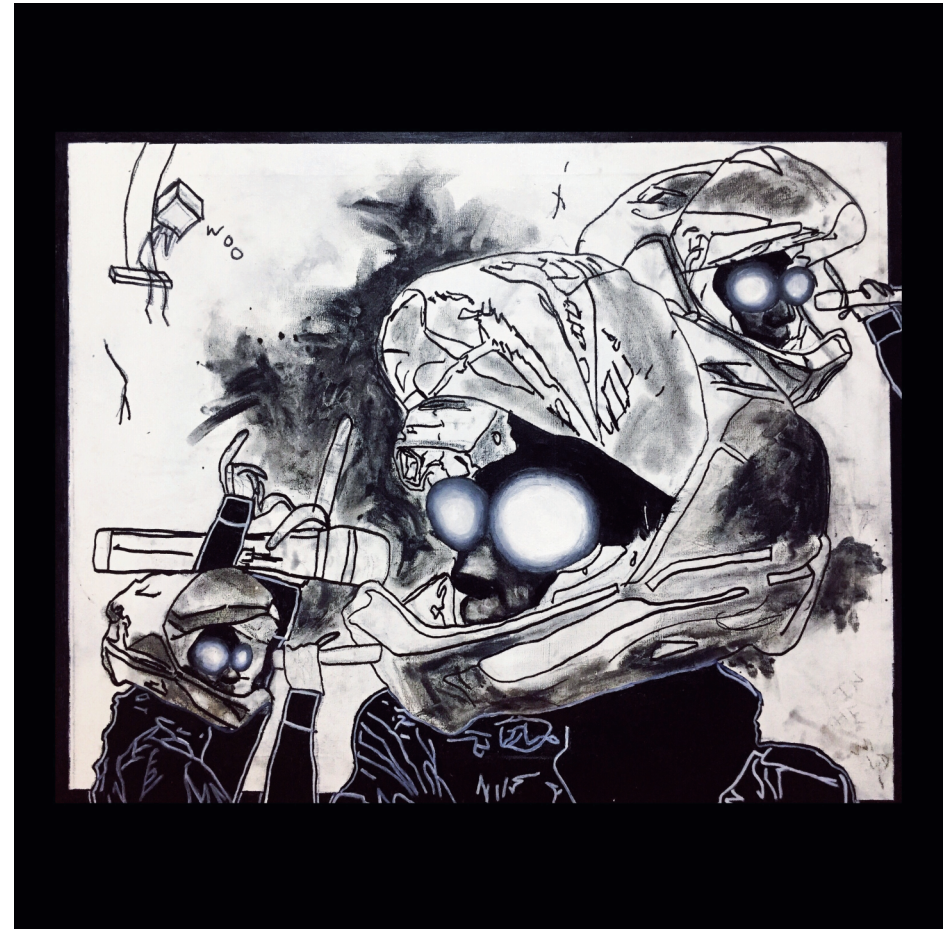
"I'm an interdisciplinary person kind of by nature and I think this kind of came out of being an emcee first. Right now what I'm doing is unprecedented. I'm an artist who's trying to force this ground in this space that has only made so much room for us, and has even made room for us with some of these twisted priorities... but that's not what makes our work, our culture valuable, whether or not we can apply it to these ever-debated priorities of schooling. We don't need schools for what we do to be valuable. We don't need validation or anything like that...I like to point out that although I'm in a university doing science around my culture that our culture has been scientific from its inception...It's a part of our story that is only now sort of being told and it has to be told because otherwise you sort of get this continuation of separating our talent as artists, as athletes, from our intellect."

—Keith Cross, professor of education



"It's a good catch-all because everything that you do is an improv on some sort of level. You have a plan, and in the great words of Mike Tyson everyone's got to play until they get punched in the teeth. You gotta improvise at some kind of level. Even in industry, even in the sciences and stuff like that, everyone has a plan, everyone has the greatest intentions going up, going forward. But as they discover things they gotta adapt, they gotta improvise, they gotta use what they've learned through different things, piece it together and make something better out of it."

—TRP, electrical engineer



In the Wild (Work in Progress)

Sly Watts

2020

18" × 24"

Charcoal, oil, spray paint, acrylic, and paint pen on canvas



*On our IG Live interview show*

### **Freestyle Fridays**

*we asked guests to respond to the*

*LIFE IS A FREESTYLE metaphor.*

*Here are some replies...*

*With QR codes that link to the full interviews.*

“Well, the nature of metaphor is to highlight, and then at the same time suppress certain information by constraining your observations. To pick certain aspects and hide other aspects. So just taking it in its totality, I think that is very much so about treating life with a certain level of improvisation, allowing yourself to kind of go with the flow of things...knowing that as much as we freestyle, and we think that it's kind of something that's happening in an instant, we're still pulling from a certain database of experience, lexicon, mood, what have you, to generate what that is. And even the things that were free, maybe even the people that we're freestyling with, we have a database and a baseline of them—like who they are, what their expectations are, what they've seen, et cetera. And then even the things that might be...say you're freestyling to a beat or you're pulling things from the environment and just incorporating that... it's these things that pre-exist that have a certain database. And so not only is [the improvisational aspect] being tapped into...but it's also being aware of the histories that are in and around you in which you are freestyling. So it's kind of like finding a balance.

And I think one of the good things about metaphor is if you're able to take a source domain and a target domain that are in pure opposition...you'll get aspects like: 'Life is already predetermined.' 'Freestyle is improvisation.'... 'Life is a freestyle' is very much so a very balanced metaphor.”

—Lupe Fiasco, rapper



“The part that sticks out to me is maybe a misconception about what freestyle is from the outside, and that's the idea that it's entirely novel. Like you're just coming up with stuff that's unheard of, that you've never thought of before. But instead, my experience and notion of freestyling and what that entails is taking bits and elements of stuff that you had thought of, and little riffs, and recombining

them in interesting and creative ways. And I think life is kind of like that, too. You have certain constraints that you're operating within, trying to combine what you have available to mix it up in interesting and different, novel ways to come up with interesting and new ideas. But you're still working from these core elements and these restrictions, these limitations...and not to just create something that's completely unheard of. But instead maybe a more reasonable, and practical, and probably true goal, is to take the elements that you have and just recombine them in interesting ways and maybe learn new things in them.”

—Buddhika Bellana, cognitive neuroscientist



“I like to look at life's questions, I like to be inspired by the world. And the way that I freestyle is... 'm inspired by just some sort of stimulus in the world. The first thing I think is, okay am I gonna write a poem about this? If I can't do that, can I write a song about this? If I can't do that, will I choreograph a dance? And if I can't do that will I turn it into a hypothesis and create a research project out of it? And for me it's just having all those skills in the bag, and as we Brits say being a jack-of-all-trades, and basically taking it out of the bag, and just seeing what works and being very experimental with what I do and how I live my life in general.”

—Dwaynica Greaves, neuroaesthetician



“I think it resonates really well because of the word 'freestyle', because it has these two components in it. One of which is 'style', which is sort of a defined pattern, constraints, restriction, a certain design, a certain purpose, a deliberate aspect to it. And it's just the opposite of 'free', because 'free' suggests spontaneity, breaking away from constraints, breaking away from limitations. And so as a word it's very powerful...sort of what one would call an oxymoron, I suppose. And I think if you have a good life, life is probably a freestyle...because it is about occupying that space between a spontaneity and deliberate action. Because having only one or the other is possibly going to lead to chaos or boredom.”

—Anna Abraham, professor of psychology

