Thomas S. Kenan Institute for the ARTS

The Artist as Leader: Stew

From his teenage years leading his own garage band in 1970s Los Angeles to his creation of the iconic band The Negro Problem in the early 1990s and all the way through the 2000s, which have seen him win a Tony for the musical "Passing Strange" and earn plaudits for several newer and equally bold theatrical projects, Stew has been an iconoclast with a singular vision. He is quick to point out, however, that his talent is anything but singular and that his artistic successes would have been impossible without the exceptional collaborators he has gathered over the decades.

In this discussion with Corey Madden, he describes how he honed his leadership skills by paying attention to the talents around him and welcoming the artists with whom he most enjoys working into a joyful, loving tribe.

Corey Madden: Let's start at the very beginning. Tell us about your upbringing, coming from Los Angeles and starting a band when you were, I think, 13.

Stew: Yeah. 13, 14.

CM: **How do you think your background and experience informed how you lead?**

Stew: Oh, everything. The love and support from the people surrounding me, period; that's the foundation. I wouldn't be crazy enough to think I could have done all these things if I had not been raised with a great deal of love and support. Not uncritical love, I have to say. Everyone told my mom, "Because you've got this little boy, you're going to spoil the hell out of him." Being a stubborn person like myself, she was like, "I am not going to spoil this kid." So … always keeping me on my toes, never making me feel like I was that great, but all the while making me very confident. Because the feeling of safety and support is, I think, what makes you feel confident.

So the love definitely, that was the big thing. I wanted to play guitar, they were like, "Fine, let's do that." They weren't like [in a frightened falsetto voice], "Oh, my God, he's going to be a …!" Of course they thought that a smart black kid in the '70s was going to turn out to be a lawyer or a doctor. They just assumed that, because that's what all my teachers were telling me I was supposed to do. I just let them all think I was going to do that.

CM: How old were you when you picked up a guitar?

Stew: 12, 13.

CM: What was your practical education like? Were you self-taught?

Stew: Oh, no. We went to lessons. We listened to records. I joined a band because my best friend said, "We need to form a band, and we need to get Zachary down the street to play bass, and you're going to play guitar." And I'm like, "OK, fine." We just started. Back then, that's what you did.

CM: And it was Los Angeles, and LA's music scene was incredible at that time.

Stew: We weren't conscious of the music scene—we were just kids—but we were conscious of music. Music was huge. When we were kids, we couldn't go to clubs and stuff. When you walked down the street in Los Angeles in the early or mid '70s, you would hear bands coming out of garages. That's what you did: You either played sports or you were in a band. There was nobody watching and playing video games at home—you could watch a lot of TV if you wanted to—but if you wanted to do something besides watch TV, you either played sports or you were in a band. So you could literally walk down the street in any neighborhood in Los Angeles, go into backyards and see some guys in a garage.

CM: **The difference between sports and a band is that right away in a band you're having to choose to do it. As a young bandleader, you were choosing what you'd play and whom you'd play with**.

Stew: Yeah, there's no coach in the band, but there's a leader that emerges. I'm watching my girlfriend's 11-year-old become a leader in his band, facing those issues of, "Oh, I actually want it to sound like this."

I can be in a room with a table full of musicians and pretty much within 15 minutes, just by conversation, know how they're going to be.

All that navigating of personalities, I started doing at a very early age. Navigating, nurturing, balancing, noticing strengths. My dad would say, "I wish you would have put that energy into management or the corporate world." But no, I can be in a room with a table full of musicians and pretty much within 15 minutes, just by conversation, know how they're going to be: the folks that don't want to play the same thing twice, the people that don't want to play parts, the people that are insecure about their talents, the people that are overly confident about their talents. I started reading that pretty much when I was 13 years old.

CM: Wow, that's amazing. Did you feel like that was something that you learned because of going into that garage over and over again? Was it the practice, the creative practice, that really taught it to you?

Stew: Yeah, the creative practice, just doing it all the time. That's what we did. We were obsessed. Music and sports have that thing where you just get caught up and you want to know more. I saw myself overtake the guy who first made me play guitar because my passion was greater than his. He went into something else afterwards.

You can't really keep a band together if you don't become an armchair psychologist.

You become an armchair psychologist in a band. You can't really keep a band together if you don't become an armchair psychologist. Again, you're The Leader of the Band, so you're into keeping it together. The other guys kind of ... they're there to have a good time.

CM: It's clear that it's passion that made you a leader, but is it also that you were willing to go further than other people?

Stew: Certainly, by default. I had no urge to be the bandleader. Actually I used to not even want to be the lead singer. I used to be the guitar player on the side, and I was happy to be in that position. I started singing songs because the lead singer quit. But there is this thing — I think that maybe it was also the times that we were living in … .

Baldwin has this really interesting idea (I thought I came up with it, but like most James Baldwin ideas, when you think you have a really great idea, he probably landed on it first): the idea of the artist as a metaphor for a human being, the idea that you treat your life in essence like a work of art. What can we learn as human beings from the way artists behave, and how can we find the artists in ourselves?

There's very little that an artist does that regular folk don't do. Artists just say, 'I'm doing this for a living.'

It doesn't mean we're all going to be able to paint like Rembrandt, but we all take an aesthetic view of life with what we wear, with how we arrange ... . How our grandmother arranges the photos on the piano: That's aesthetics. We do it all the time, though some of us don't realize

we're doing it. We're doing it with food, we're doing it with family photos, we're doing it with our choice of words even. So this idea of living an expressive life, an examined life, this artist's thing that people when you're growing up tell you, "Well, that's what *artists* do," no, actually we all do this. There's very little that an artist does that regular folk don't do. Artists just say, "I'm doing this for a living." That's really the difference.

CM: Also, this idea of permission. Last night, there were so many moments in the piece ["Notes of a Native Song**," a song cycle inspired by the work of James Baldwin] when you said things that I think create followership because they're so true but they rarely get said. Let's talk about your lyrics. How have you developed your method of communicating with your audience? Because you say some very powerful things that create a huge, huge reaction.**

Stew: I think like everybody I'm interested in what is said on the surface in everyday life. Growing up I had a lot of indicators and a lot of signifiers, for instance, in terms of what blackness was, what blackness was supposed to be. So as a kid I was growing up seeing depictions of blackness. So even if you're nine years old, you know that when every single TV show looks this way with black people and then you turn around and look at the people in the living room and they don't look like that, your critical faculties, your antenna immediately form. You know even at nine years old, "There's something going on here that I'm being fed constantly, even if I like it. But it's different than what's going on in my living room."

I can remember passing by Paramount Studios one day. There's a street where in the old days you could look into Paramount Studios and see a blue sky with clouds. It was a backdrop. It was like a *Truman Show* kind of thing. I remember just passing by one day and going, "That's fake, and it looks real!" So this is at 9 or 10 years old. So you're growing up, you're seeing the riots on TV, and you say, "OK, that's black people." Then you look around, and your middle-class aunts and uncles walk in, and they're not rioting.

So I feel like the core of my lyrics are more about throwing out little suggestions: "Hey, did you notice this? Have a look at this." I just think I'm saying things that I think most people either think or almost think. I don't think I'm inventing anything.

I think that's the other thing about leadership. I think the artist in a way kind of follows the people, but very closely. Like we're right behind them, and then they maybe don't see something, and we go, "Hey, that thing we just passed!" We're not in front of them; we're almost, I think, waiting to respond to what they see and say. The news says this or your friend says that. In a conversation, your mom says this, reality is this way, you go, "Well, actually, what if it's like this?"

CM: Well, in your work you talk about being a court jester, which I think is really interesting because that's somebody who's in the court but who ultimately is the disruptor …

Stew: I totally feel that.

CM: … who wants to say in a humorous way, “Don’t just look at the illusion; pay attention to this!”

Stew: Yeah, this comes from the very particular time I grew up in, the time of my real growing up, which I would say is from '61 to '75, let’s say.

I was bused when I was 10 years old. The narrative was that white schools were better. I got bused to a white school that was not better. So my mom took me out of the white school, sent me back to my old school. The Los Angeles Unified School District called my mom on the first day of fifth grade and said, “What are you doing? We can’t have this. You can’t send a black kid back to the school we bused him from.” And my mom was like, “I’ve seen the math he’s doing.”

We were used to these imperious seven-foot-tall black women in wigs who were like, “You’re going to get a good education because Malcolm and Martin died so that you ... !” You know what I mean? That was what we were used to. And suddenly there were these hippie white teachers who meant well but ... . So I’m looking at that, thinking, “So this is the good school?!” You can’t help but think about the contradictions and the nuttiness of life when you’re in it. I mean, busing and all those things influenced me.

I just think that it’s that window, that '60s-'70s window when we were questioning things and nothing really followed as it was supposed to. I was a 9-year-old in a black and Jewish neighborhood, right? So I was taught about slavery by my African-American teachers, who were fantastic, and I learned, “OK, so the narrative of the world is that white people do bad things to black people.” Then I met an old Jewish woman on a bus when we moved to the Fairfax District in Los Angeles. She had a number on her arm. I said, “What’s that?” She told me what it was. I said, “Who did that?” She said, “Germans.” She’s white. I said, “Germans did that to you? White people? White people, right? They’re white, aren’t they?” And she said, “Yeah, they don’t get any whiter than that.” I went home to my mom, and I said, “This white woman told me that white people put her people into camps and killed them!” And my mom said, “OK, let’s sit down. Let’s talk about it.”

So being informed by Jews and Jewish culture, learning that there were other oppressions in the world, not just my own, seeing how they intersected, how they didn’t ... I credit the times I was born in. If you were going to ever be an artist, my God, the ‘60s and ‘70s would’ve been the time to be formed.

CM: **Let’s talk about how you work with other artists in the many projects you’re creating**.

Stew: I have my collaborator, Heidi Rodewald, who’s been an essential part of my work, my main collaborator, since 1997. She does about 50% of the music; I do all the lyrics. We have a very unprecious sort of Tin Pan Alley approach. I’m like, “OK, I need music for that. I’m in over my head. Here’s some lyrics. Put some music to that.” It doesn’t matter that she’s a white girl from Orange County. We both grew up listening to the same soul stations and the same rock stations in Southern California. As long as she was listening to the same radio, that’s my culture in a lot of ways. I think picking your people is huge in these kinds of relationships. She and I don’t need to talk about things. We just know what we need; we know what we do.

As for musicians, I play mostly with jazz musicians. I don't play with rock musicians very much. Heidi and I call ourselves—this is unpublishable—the only dumb-shit rock musicians in a band. We know five or six or seven chords, and we play them all the time. But we play with really good musicians. They are a different animal than rock musicians.

I try to reward people in my work by letting them bring as much of themselves as they can into it.

And again psychology comes into the picture. I try to make people comfortable. I try to make people do what I want via their own path. I learned from Duke Ellington that you have to find out what people do well and let them do that within the context of your work. You cannot make them think or play like you. I think that probably transfers to business, athletics or anything else. You have to let *them* do *them* within the context of what you're trying to accomplish and own it when it's not going to work and reap the reward when it is going to work. I try to reward people in my work by letting them bring as much of themselves as they can into it. That's the goal; that's the money. The thing I'm maybe most proud of in my work is that I have musicians that I can call who have said, "I will play with you guys for free because that's how much fun it is." There's no bigger compliment than that.

CM: You're empowering them through their strengths. And I'm making the connection to your helping other people make meaning.

Stew: For sure, for sure. This idea that you could somehow shape people? Some bandleaders are into that, some directors are into that. That's not me. I want to find this person who is to me already perfect and see if I can fit their perfection into to my work. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't, but when it works it's amazing.

CM: **What would you encourage in other artists so they'd feel more comfortable about stepping up into positions of leadership?**

Stew: I always tell my students that if you're 25 years old, for instance, odds are you don't have a ton of stories. You haven't lived through a lot. But what you have, you have to mine. Most of my students don't want to write about their families because they're trying to get away from them. I tell them: "Sorry, that's your bag of tricks right there. That's all you've got in most cases. If you have lived in 50 countries by the time you're 25 and volunteered for the revolutionary army of whatever, then great, write about that. But odds are you've got a mom and a dad and some crazy relatives, and you have to go to Thanksgiving and you have to go to Christmas or Hanukkah. That's what you need to write about." You need to deal with those people. They are your audience. They will always be your audience, whether you're running from them or to them.

Today more than at any other time that I've experienced in my life, people feel, "Oh my God, what should I write about?" Let's just be frank: A lot of my white students feel this. I'm like, "Write about you. Write about what you have experienced." A woman came to me, a Japanese-American woman, and she said, "I've got this play. I want to talk to you about it. It's about the oppression of Sudanese Muslim women." I said, "Cool." She said, "What are your thoughts?" I

said: “Any oppression in the women in your family? Is there any oppression, any sexism, any patriarchy in your own family? If the Ford Foundation gives you a grant to go to Sudan, then fine, go there. But right now, today, talk to me about your mom and your aunts and your grandma. Let’s figure that out first before we start talking about this.” She wanted to do something relevant, but those people are relevant and those people are going to be the key to you understanding all the other oppressed women. You’ve got to understand the ones that are showing up at Thanksgiving first, right? This panic of, “Can I be relevant?” Some of my students of color feel like they have to write about being students of color. I’m like, “No, you don’t have to do that either. It’s OK for you to paint a landscape.”

I want people to not ignore who they are and where they come from. I was dumb enough to think that no one would care about the stuff in "Passing Strange." I was wrong. Thank God I had enough people around me telling me, “No, this is good.” Because I really didn’t think so. I thought it was so niche-y. And even when we thought we knew what it was about, the audience told me what the play was really about. The play is really about a mother and a son. I didn’t know that. I thought it was about all these heavy, middle class, intellectual, race, sex, blah blah blah, and then people outside of the theater on Broadway would be like, “This makes me want to call my mom!” That’s what everybody said. I didn’t know that. I almost kind of took offense when I first heard it, but after the 200th time I’m like, “OK, maybe the audience knows something that I don’t.”

That’s what I’m trying to say to that young artist: Write a play about your mom. Or at least understand your mom, understand your parents, understand your family, understand your neighborhood, understand your church, understand your synagogue or whatever. Understand these things. This is the foundation. You need a foundation.

CM: **Just one more question: Is there any advice that you would have liked to have gotten when you were younger that you’d want to give to a young artist today?**

Stew: I got lucky, so I don’t know if I have any advice. I mean, yes, I have advice, but I experienced the advice I’m going to give. Finding like-minded people, finding your tribe. Finding like-minded people is huge. I don’t know what it would have been like to be alone. I’ve never been alone doing this. I always had a band. When my band many years later, when all the folks went and got “real jobs,” Heidi was there. Heidi’s been with me forever. I think you need a tribe. It’s really cold and lonely doing this thing. I think you need a tribe.

I think it’s more important for your work to be understood than loved.

I also think it’s more important for your work to be understood than loved. I think it’s very easy for people to love things. We love the Beatles, we love Chinese food, we love a lot of things, right? But *understanding* that collaborator, that person who’s close to you? We were loved by our Broadway producers, but they had no idea how to advertise the show. The kids that came in and understood how to advertise the show? The Broadway producers were completely freaked out by them because they came in in jeans and they had a PowerPoint presentation which blew the entire band and cast away. And the Broadway producers said, “We don’t understand this,”

and we were like, “Exactly! Because we’re not trying to get *you* to the theater.” They *loved* Passing Strange, but they did not *understand* it.

CM: I love that. What a great, concrete example. Thank you so much for talking with us.

Stew: Thank you!

Epilogue

Stew reminds us of the compelling importance of remembering your roots and where you came from as a driver to find your authentic voice both as an artist and a leader. Takeaways from our time with Stew include:

- **Watch people.** Attend to your surroundings to see what does and doesn’t work.
- **Translate.** Provide context for what you observe in order to give meaning for others to follow.
- **Know your own dinner table.** Leading starts by knowing and exploring your own story first.
- **Be authentic.** Your background and experiences inform your art and leadership. People are less inspired if you pretend to tell someone else’s story.
- **Avoid cronyism.** Let people do their best work as you provide leadership regarding the project's overall context and goal.
- **Speak the language others need to hear from.** People will follow a vision or goal if it harmonizes with their own goals and aspirations.

Stew

Singer-Songwriter & Playwright

Stew is an award-winning singer-songwriter, author, co-composer, and playwright whose creative contributions have garnered worldwide acclaim. Most notably, Stew’s semiautobiographical rock musical “Passing Strange” earned a Tony Award for Best Book in 2008 and two Obie Awards in 2007 (Best New Theater Piece and Best Ensemble). The final performance of the masterwork was filmed by Spike Lee for a feature film which screened at the Sundance Festival in January 2009 before debuting on PBS’ Great Performances later that year. Stew leads a band called Stew & The Negro Problem, whose eight albums have attracted much

critical acclaim and numerous Album of the Year awards. Stew and Heidi Rodewald, his two-time Obie Award-winning collaborator, continue to create revolutionary new musical theater pieces, most recently “Notes of a Native Song,” which was commissioned in 2015 by the Harlem Center for its James Baldwin centenary celebration and which they have since performed in venues throughout the country. Other theatrical pieces include “Making It” (commissioned by St. Ann’s Warehouse), “Brooklyn Omnibus,” (commissioned by the Brooklyn Academy of Music) and The Total Bent (developed and premiered at the Public Theater).