

WYF_Ep91_BestOf_MaliMusic

Rasool Berry: Hey y'all, it's Rasool Berry. Thanks for joining me on this special *Best of Where Ya From?* episode. We went back and selected some of our favorite conversations to share with you so that no matter when you started listening to *Where Ya From?*, you could check them out. Today, I wanted to share our episode with musician Mali Music.

In addition to being one of my favorite artists, Mali was such a fun guest. His passion and energy, and somewhat just randomness, were palpable. And he channels all that into inspiring, moving, and theologically profound music. Since we talked, Mali has won a Grammy. Congratulations, and has been nominated for another for his project, *Mali x Jonny: Live in LA*. This album is really good. You should check it out. And thanks for listening, and enjoy this *Best of Where Ya From?* with Mali Music.

Mali Music: I ran away. I'm taking off through the, like, the bushes and I'm hearing the highway. So I crossed over the banister and now I'm walking on the highway against traffic.

Rasool Berry: Wow.

Mali Music: And I'm just like, fumbling. I'm hoping someone just field goals me. And a car drives by, "Kortney Pollard?" Phew. It's one of the football moms that recognizes me, takes me in. My parents hear that I'm there and they retrieve me. And my dad treated me different every day since. He said anything, my son will fight me for I support.

Daniel Ryan Day: This is *Where Ya From?*, a podcast for those who believe it's important to stop and listen before we speak. Join us as we ask another Christian thought leader where are you from, and discover how their life experiences and expertise, even if we may disagree with something they say, offer us an important perspective that's worth thinking about.

Rasool Berry: Welcome to *Where Ya From?*. I'm Rasool Berry. When have you pursued something you love, despite people telling you never make it? Have you ever been criticized for pursuing a calling? What would you do if the choice before you was to either follow your calling, or give it up to please the people around you?

Today, we're talking with someone who knows what it takes to pursue his calling, despite the resistance of the people closest to him. Kortney Jamal Pollard, best known as Mali Music, is a Grammy-nominated recording artist,

singer/songwriter, and producer. His music has received wide recognition in both sacred and secular spheres. Join me as I ask Mali Music where you're from.

Mali Music: I was born in Phoenix, Arizona. But I was raised in Savannah, Georgia.

Rasool Berry: Okay. And that was something actually in preparing for this conversation that I discovered that I didn't know about you before. So like, what was the Phoenix connection?

Mali Music: Military baby.

Rasool Berry: Ah.

Mali Music: So Phoenix was where my mother was at that specific time when I came into the world. I was soon sent to Savannah, Georgia with my grandmother.

Rasool Berry: Wow, that's interesting. So, you didn't go to Savannah initially with your parents?

Mali Music: No, no, no, no. My mom was still in the military from what I know. I came up with my grandmother very early.

Rasool Berry: So, was that hard growing up for a time without your mom?

Mali Music: Well, it wasn't without her because I didn't really notice because we were so cocooned. It was such a village, and I'm also on a mountain of cousins. So, this is where I all the children are. So, it's cool because we got to see a generation above us, brother, sister, cousins. And then there was us who was just like them, but we were just a younger pack and just taught to be together. So, my mom, she was there. And if not there, then it was my eldest sister, who was my little mom.

Rasool Berry: Yeah. A real village. You had a real village situation. What about your father? What kind of connection was there?

Mali Music: Well, that was distant. I didn't know my biological father, early. That was something that I saw at 18. I asked my stepdad, who gave me my direction and my masculinity, my understanding and the sensitivity of being a gentleman, he gave me all of my correction on character over anything else. And that blessed me, the things that he instilled.

But my biological father wasn't necessarily there to do that. But when I turned 18, I wanted to connect with my biological father. So, I did. I asked my parents and got some information from my grandmother and my biological father lived in Tunica, Mississippi, where he died.

Rasool Berry: Got it. Tell us a little bit about for you. What was it like to grow up in Savannah?

Mali Music: I knew nothing else and if I'm very honest with you, I may not have even noticed Savannah. I was so enthralled with music. And the portion of Savannah that I took was from my church, and inside of my ministry. Because even though Savannah is beautiful, it represented the world to me. but it was also crazy because I didn't notice how deep South I was.

So, all of the cringing experiences that I was getting day to day. And then the things that my relatives were enduring and complaining about that night would be heavily racial issues that I thought was normal. So yeah, I was deep south. But I never noticed it until late. Because I just was so into music and it was just about home and church.

Rasool Berry: Yeah. When do you remember first connecting with music?

Mali Music: Early. It's how I learned. Like I was telling the story recently to my loving queen, and I was telling her that my mom was so very good with me. She had epileptic fits when I was in her womb. So, she suggested to sit down, which was torment to such an active woman. But she obeyed and I have just a very strong sit-down bond, you know. She chose me over her for that time. My mom even now would complain about being heavily dyslexic. So, everything's backwards or she'll write something. So she's really smart, has a lot of information. She just knows it all in reverse.

And I guess she had a bad experience early of someone either laughing at her or maybe that something happened to her in school as a young girl to where she just created this formula of baby, we can do it. We can learn it. We can get this. She just was very aggressive and headstrong in that way. So if I, or my sister, showed any type of like learning curve need, she was nonjudgmental of it. And she was so versatile between me and my sisters and how she would help us learn it. It was all songs from Mali.

Like, my eldest sister, what's the address? Boom. My youngest sister, what's our address? Boom. Mali, what's our address? I do not know. If it was said, stated, or written, it was irrelevant. But if she sung it, it stuck. So, I know all of my

addresses, phone numbers, until this day, by peculiar melodies tucked in a part of my heart.

Rasool Berry: Wow. Wow.

Mali Music: So my mom taught me that. That's what life is. So my mom, she has both of my hands singing it to, "Mali Apartment 39C," and I'm like, okay, that's where we at.

Rasool Berry: So, it was music from the beginning. In fact, you mentioned one time that one of your favorite memories as a kid was your family harmonizing together. So that wasn't just in you that that was also something that was around. Tell us about that.

Mali Music: My mother's brother, Leroy Keith Ladson, was like my musical idol. My uncle Keith, I call him my un-Keith. Fly, man, come on. He wore a suit, matching shoes. He had crazy colors. I hear stories that he was the boy in high school that was like flamboyant with the clothes, you know. Like they either laughing at Keith because Keith coming in sharp, you know.

He also aspired to pastor and did and sung, but he played keyboard. So that's as close as I got to an instrument and seeing like what this is coming out of his fingers. I was heavily influenced by him. And he and my mother would be forced and told to sing by my great grandmother Rosa, who had a church named Love and Faith.

So that's when I would hear my grandmother say, come on up here and sing that song for me, and my uncle Keith would start it . . . And they would sing that song, *Where Do You Stand*. And then my uncle Tommy would go, I've been running, running, and he got like this big voice, and I'm just sitting experiencing this. And then my mom would come in with the high note and she'll sing the other part, and it would just wreck the church. But when they would go to this, "Where do you stay? I'm on the Lord's side," My uncle Keith . . . that was like, wow. But it was something powerful when they all would go, "I'm on, I'm on, I'm on. The Lord, the Lord, the Lord's Side!" Now for them to get that level in church, that my mom's cooking, and they're at the house just practicing and it's busting. And you know when Harmony's lock it goes, zzzzzzz . . .

Rasool Berry: Yeah. You hear this like, yeah, this vibration. Yeah. . .

Mali Music: That means you on. So, I'm the kid like hearing that VVVV. And then, so now my sister, she would mock my mom, and I would mock my uncle. And then when my time my cousin Tommy came in, we had a little harmony.

Me and my cousin, KK, will be tapping on the drum, two-part harmony bus. So, I love harmony, and I feel that I have a connection to everybody who knows how to stay on a part, you know? That's like brothers and relatives to me.

Rasool Berry: Man, that's amazing. So you were just saturated in a language that you understood and just naturally could translate and understand for yourself.

Mali Music: Well as I stated earlier, and I'll mention this quickly, my uncle Keith was a bit of a creative rebel. And then my mother was just this headstrong, talented, smart woman who was just always in my life. But I learned that her aspiration was Broadway. She wanted to be a Broadway singer. My grandfather, her father, the original Latson, the father of her and my uncle Keith, was a traveling musician. And according to the lore, died on tour in Chicago, in an alley helping a lady that he saw getting robbed. That story got back to my grandmother, causing her to traumatically disassociate the family with music for safety. Not wanting my mother or her son Keith to go out on the road and die too.

And to this day, if I will see my grandmother from coming back from being on tour, she will say, son, they will kill you. That's the thing she says to me. Be careful out there, son. They will kill you. I'm like, yeah, yes, ma'am. As you know, as I'm getting invited places and I'm looking in the eyes of strangers left and right, my deepest counsel is they will kill you.

And that's how I know that she's scarred and hurt and has her story. And she's giving me her truth. People say I have trust issues, you know. That's because I stay out of the range of their spears and swords. I got to come closer to get cut. And I don't because they will kill you.

Rasool Berry: Wow, that's deep. So, you mentioned earlier that, you know, your grandmom had also this very deep sense of spiritual formation for you. Tell me a little bit about your spiritual formation, and what was that like, and when would you say you kind of held on to God personally and began to walk with him?

Mali Music: It was a mixture of a lot of things. But my earliest memory is just being absolved by my great-grandmother Rosa. And she would call me upstairs among my sisters and cousins, and she would ask me to sing.

She would let me hear these songs, because I would have to learn the songs I wouldn't know it. She'll hum some of them to me, but there was one in particular. I still have joy. Still have joy. After all the things I've been through, I

still have joy. I still . . . she would make me sing that to her, like, a mind-numbing amount of times.

She would begin to cry and say, “Say peace and sing it with feelings, son.” I would say, “Oh, I still have peace, still have peace.” And it would bless her. And then she would come to embarrass me by calling me up in the single digits before her whole church. My mother, my uncle, all the people I admire, my sisters, my cousins who were laughing at me, and asked me to sing that for them.

I would say, no, no, no. I'm crying. And she would not allow me to leave from up there. So, I cried for 15 minutes, getting laughed at by my cousins and sisters. My great grandma would not let me leave until I got it together in the front of *everyone* and sung that song. That's when I feel I was formed.

That's when I was like, well, fear doesn't work. Crying doesn't work. Then I'm about to just laugh. So now since then I just would come out just guns blazing. Because you know, that was the last time there ever was a crying me on stage.

Rasool Berry: Wow. Boy, when they say they don't make them like they used to. I mean, that's intense. She's just like, I'll wait.

Mali Music: Cause I know what's in there.

Rasool Berry: That's so deep, man. And to see how that early relationship with music was formed. I mean, you mentioned they would call you Mali. So like, that was her early nickname for you?

Mali Music: Yeah. From my mother. From whatever that bond was. My name's Kortney Jamal Pollard. I hated being a young, black Kortney. . .

Rasool Berry: Yeah. What some people don't know about you is your athletic prowess. So, tell us a little bit about that journey.

Mali Music: That was unexpected, actually. I was the kid that didn't do homework but had 110 on chorus on my report card. Like, I was trying to make the statement, guys, you don't make me learn anything else, mom and dad.

You know, and they're like, boy, stop sabotaging your life. Do this work, like what are you doing? I actually got into football or anything late. I was going straight music. I was already accepted applicant at Savannah Arts Academy, where I was gonna just meet more violinists, and go deeper down the wormhole. But we had a field day where I got a chance to play these sports.

That's when I started getting exposed to the jocks. So now there's like this breed of people who come out and they just know how to move, and they know all the rules. But I understood through singing how something subtle could affect a crowd. Like you can go, ooh, and they'll go, ooh. So, people are mostly connected to what my feet and body are doing.

And so the concept is to not let this guy get me. OK, well, my team was losing, but long story short, we just started running, you know, plays. One of the guys say we're going to play quarterback or whatever. So, he threw it to me. I took off, and I was a little faster than the other people. And then I was fastened in the next play.

Then I started recognizing that everybody started going, ooh, when I ran. So, I just started running fast. This one fairly started getting attention of the coaches as I just could not stop scoring, I guess. So, I started learning the concept of the game. Got out of music a little bit and just like, I like the part where I run and score.

So, they asked my father after school if I could try out for football. My mom says no. I wanted to try out cause I just wanted to test my manhood against the jocks. And I had much success. My me and my dad kind of he snuck and let me try out and I made the team, so we had to tell mom.

Rasool Berry: Okay, let me just pause for a second because what you just shared. I have never heard someone use competence in music to describe.

Mali Music: But that was my connection. . .

Rasool Berry: That's what I'm saying. That kind of just reaffirms what you said earlier about how your mom knew if she wanted Mali to learn something, even like an address, teach it through music. You literally were looking at a football game in the relationship with the audience.

Mali Music: Coaches responded different if you, like, got more yards after somebody. If you broke a play. So I'm like, okay, so this is cool.

So, all I need to learn was the defenders and they were like difficult parts in songs. Like trying to learn . . . you know. That's a defensive bag, just scat his feet. So it was cool. I never took it serious though, cause I just wanted to do music. I was so absorbed in music that the school, Benedictine Military School in Savannah, Georgia scouted me.

They started coming to like all my football games. It started getting weird. People started really overreacting to me physically. I got a nutritionist, a trainer. I put on like 20 pounds. I got shoulders, back, abs, chest, and all I want to do is sing. So that made me want to disappear. So, I loved falling into just the shadow of the Most High. Like disappearing in worship. Because it was so much pressure to perform on every level of my life academically, athletically. I had to know how to make this person feel just to stand in an elevator with them so they wouldn't feel like they were in danger. I had to know how to speak. This is a different life. So music was just a beautiful. . .

Rasool Berry: Wow. So how did that end up resolving? Cause obviously you're still getting attention football wise.

Mali Music: Well, yeah, it got crazy because I got scouted by all these teams. But all of a sudden, dad's like bussing now. So then that gave me an extra umph. Because I'm like, my dad doesn't cry out for me. My dad doesn't say anything unless it's Shaq, Jordan, or something like that. But he's like really loving me right now. He's like, let's go Mali. And I'm like, yo, I'm fitting to get this first down for pops straight up. That really brought my dad into play. So I was really running for that relationship. Because it made his love evident. He loved me when I played football. It's not that he doesn't love me now. And he probably would hate that part if he saw that.

Rasool Berry: But that was from your eyes, the way that you interpreted his enthusiasm was that way.

Mali Music: I'm talking about, when I had success at my school, my dad got promotions at work. I went to the most influential school in the city. My classmates were the sons and daughters of the judges and lawyers, like the owners of the car dealership.

Rasool Berry: Mm-hmm.

Mali Music: It was so different than the lives of everyone that came crying out to God at my church.

Rasool Berry: Mm.

Mali Music: It was such a paradox because they were just smart, wealthy, plugged in, connected people. They didn't even need God for the same reasons I worshiped him.

Rasool Berry: Mm.

Mali Music: So, my athletic career gave me exposure socially. As I began to learn who I was and wasn't in the earth as well. You know, coaches were doing the academics. So as long as I was going touchdowns, I didn't have to do too much in class. If I disappointed them, they might crack down on me or something like that.

It was weird, but I guess I was in the core of athletic prime without even knowing, caring, or valuing it. You know? I was getting like valued like a prospect. And I just wanted to play piano.

Rasool Berry: And I'm seeing these two worlds you're talking about kind of going into this collision. Like, how does that get resolved?

Mali Music: Tenth grade is when I understood the sport enough, and what they were expecting of me. And I also like for myself said, I want my family to see this, and I chose football as a ground to develop my masculinity. Because you can't do it in the house with two sisters and a mom and a dad. Like you just need some bros that's just going to give it to you. And I crave that, had no brothers, so I like when the gloves come off.

Because no one has to talk about how strong they are anymore. Just come on, let's go. And then I just started getting basic respect on who I was as a person and what I could do versus how, I didn't focus or process like the jocks, but I did run a 4.2. That's what made the guys crazy. They would say quick as a cat in the hot tin roof when I would get the ball. So anyway, that was football. That felt good.

Rasool Berry: Pause. I just got to let people know, when you said a 4.2 40, that is elite professional football.

Mali Music: That's what everybody kept saying.

Rasool Berry: I just gotta say that out loud for those that may not know that. That's like your favorite running back or wide receiver probably doesn't run that fast as Mali was running. Okay, but I didn't mean to cut you off. So, alright, 11th grade football.

Mali Music: That's when it started peaking athletically. I started getting scouted. I'll be sitting amongst my peers and the coach would come and give me coaching. rubber bands of envelopes from Georgia, Florida. So now I'm getting all these like cool emblems and they're getting sent to my house and me and my dad are getting invited to like games.

But a lot of my friends that are diehard football guys are not getting this attention. So, they start hating me. So, I started experiencing hazing to a death. But then that's when I got the full portion of the nastiness of what comes with that. And also, the world started opening up because, I mean, you get kind of love as a singer, but as a public out athlete, just all this different types of stuff that I just was not exposed to already for.

12th grade comes. I get scouted. Now colleges are coming to my school. My school is getting offers and favors and I deny going. I don't want to put my body on the line to say that that's how I'm going to make my money, or that's how I'm going to serve anybody. I didn't want to be cattle. So I said, I'm not going to do it. I wasn't hurt. I wasn't injured. I could go as far or as fast as anybody that was out there, but I just didn't want to be practicing, or trying to compete against another group of guys. I'm not that interested in this. So, no. And man, it blew up. It blew up. I thought it was just high school football. I thought you could go to high school and play whatever you want.

I did. It was great. It was football, but this isn't my relationship. I'm not with this. I'm graduating and I'm trying to go on me saying that I wasn't going to play football. Cause me to not get, I couldn't even graduate. Right after I said, I wasn't going to sign, and go college or anything, my coach like jacked me up on the locker. Like Pollard, what are you doing? Such a waste of talent. You have all this God-given ability and you're going to waste it to make rap beats.

You know, I'm like, well, coach, I love music. I thought you and everybody knew that. And I make great songs. Like I make some of the worship, but I don't make rap beats. But then that was kind of a stab that made me always want to do great music. Because I know that people were going to be looking at me and saying, Oh, I know exactly how he sounds. So, I have coaches and people in a whole football world that was saying, he says he does music. Let's see what this loser puts out.

So I'm putting my heart into what I'm doing because it's not going to be received if I make any mistakes. And in fact, if I don't make any mistakes, they will be found.

Rasool Berry: How did your family respond to your decision to not?

Mali Music: It was tough because I lost my dad for a while because he sunk. It took full faith. He like, hold on. I mean, I know that you like music and you sing at church, but you ain't that good. You know, like you clearly good with football. You got all this. We got these opportunities. But you really think there's a career or a life for you in that? I didn't even think about it. I just thought I had the right to choose.

But everybody wanted the security of knowing that what I chose was a solid thing. So, college is securing to some adults in your life. Sports is securing because they could see the future. They can have something to compare it on. But if it's something that's out of there, like you're going to do what, you going to waste your life.

And I've really learned the people who did not believe at that time. And it was the people who were closest to me. And it was like a sabotage because. The school was disappointed. They soon called me to the office for cheating because they said that the four years that I was there, I did not show. But those were my teachers. The coaches that said I was doing it were my teachers. They said I didn't have to do that stuff. They didn't even put the effort in teaching this stuff.

Rasool Berry: Wow.

Mali Music: But when I didn't go the full way, they called it, and said that it was bad. And I was like, coach, but they all act like they didn't know. And the dean of students had punished me and told me that I had to take the test for all of my finals again.

And if my scores didn't match, then it would prove that I did not take the original test. So, this turns into me studying. All of the guys studying with me, which was a beautiful moment. I saw just people of all colors, shapes, and sizes see the system collapse, on me and help me out. Help me just with basic geometry, just giving me all the tools.

So, I learned everybody's way of learning. It was cool. It was cool! I learned everybody, like 150 people's way of learning, everything I wanted to learn because they wanted me to be successful because they know what I was dealing with was wrong.

Rasool Berry: Man, it's wild how your story is both showing the corruption of the idolatry of sport and our culture.

Mali Music: I'm not even out of high school.

Rasool Berry: And you're not even out of high school. . .

When we come back, Mali will share how he overcame the criticism and resistance of his family and peers to follow his musical calling. That's coming up next on *Where Ya From?*.

Midbreak: If you're enjoying *Where Ya From?*, would you take a moment to write a quick review and give us some stars?

Podcast platforms like iTunes and Google promote highly rated shows. So, a one sentence review of what this episode or show means to you, and a quick five-star rating, will help these important stories reach more people. Thank you for your help, and keep listening for more of *Where Ya From?*.

Rasool Berry: Welcome back to *Where Ya From?*. I'm Rasool Berry. And in just a moment, we'll continue our conversation with Mali Music. Before we do, just a quick reminder that the show notes are available in the podcast description. They not only contain the talking points for today's show, but some links to learn more about Mali Music and his albums. You can find these links in the show notes or by visiting whereyafrom.org. That's where y-a from dot o r g. Now let's rejoin Mali Music on this episode of *Where Ya From?*.

All right. So just to fast forward. So, I remember when we talked earlier and you had this interesting moment where you talked about how when you started doing music, you were keeping it a secret.

Mali Music: Yes.

Rasool Berry: Why were you keeping it a secret?

Mali Music: I served the church, man. I served the church, man. And I served the body. It's not about all of that. That was a craft of something that I was being led by the Spirit to create. You know, it was something beautiful and fun that I was excitedly like honing and crafting for that moment where pastor, if he would allow me to say something to my generation in church, I wanted it to be ready, prepared, polished and good. Not something that we just threw together.

I would spend so much time on those things because I would just feel like the pressure was on me to come through for the people that were my age in the church. Because something that I was doing in ministry would cause them to stay committed, too. So, the church was full of us and we were in the Word.

But we needed a sound. And my pastor was very good in allowing me from time to time to do that. It wasn't like, hey, learn this song, learn this song, you got to play this way. I would come in, hear his message, go down an hour before service, create something. And then he'll say, Mali do you have something?

It'd be something I wrote that day. I taught it to the praise and worship team. And now we're chanting more than a conqueror because pastor is about to preach that. Now, by the time he says the message, it goes in every heart. I just started noticing those things, and I just never wanted the word of God or the words of God, or the things of God, to be detested or underestimated like I was for carrying it, loving it, valuing it.

Rasool Berry: So when do you start to realize it goes from Savannah from your local church and the word starts getting out?

Mali Music: Social media. Myspace started coming. The songs that I would be like dad, but I'm working on something. Where what I will be posting on my Myspace page at work, you know. Which is actually why, like, my boss, Mr. Carpenter, came in and said, hey, you were using the computers here to post these things or whatever. It seems like thousands of people are commenting to you. You've left 14 discs inside of the units from the time that you've come to now. Go do what you're supposed to do.

So, it'll be like 7:30. I'll upload a song that I did, and it'll be like, um, I hate you. You know, and then I'll put it up on the Myspace and then I'll go, that'll be a work day. I'll check it at my work break, at my lunch break and it'll be like, yo, 9,997 people listened to that from the time that I posted it to now. What? So, I was scared of that because I didn't know what that was. And I was just so focused with ministry. And I didn't want my pastor to think that it was something that I was like, seduced by, or that I was trying to do. I was just putting the songs out because I knew they were relevant. I had my coach against me.

I had my dad against me. I knew the church would have me continue to go, but that's if I continue to build their culture. I started noticing no one was actually caring about letting my foot hit the ground, or even letting me make a print, if they weren't by me or directing every step. And I had to leave a mark.

Rasool Berry: Wow. So, okay. All right. So, you realize in order to leave a footprint, that's something that you're going to have to make the move to do for yourself. So what ends up becoming the steps that you take to make that happen?

Mali Music: My boss, Mr. Carpenter saying that caused me to like drive off in like a bliss. And that's the first time I was like, wow, man, I did something that actually like affected something.

I could see what he's saying. I could see that there is a demand somewhere for whatever's going on, but I haven't even ever always focused on this, trying to honor my dad making me come here. So, it was my dad and my family was my main support system. So, I drive home and I had to face my father who was like, you know, hey, what you, what you doing here a little early, you know?

Yeah, I had a conversation with Mr. Carpenter. He heard my music. He saw my Myspace page. That is crazy. He even knows it is successful. I'm so excited about what God is doing. It's something really special here. Boy, go back to that job. Dad, I'm serious. It's something, you know, really go ahead. I'm not going to say it again.

You get what I mean? I'm like, Dad, no, I'm not going back. He told me to go do whatever this is. And that was the first time I said no to my dad. I'm a Southern boy. Hello? No. And then the concept of like the rebuttal. But I already worked there. I already did what he asked me to do in doing what he asked me to do I was told by what he asked me to do, to do what I know to do. And that led into physical contact between me and my dad, because.

By the time I'm going in on saying no and I'm getting hit in the mouth. So that you know, it caused me to stumble. There was more anger inside of what he was dishing out You know, I could feel it in the contact and it made me want to run away. I wanted to die that night. I even tried to like take my own life. Because I just was upset at everything. And I didn't think that I could have a more basic desire than to sing. I just wanted to sing. I wasn't bothering anybody. I ran away. I'm taking off through the like the bushes and I'm hearing the highway. So, I cross over the banister and now I'm walking on the highway against traffic.

Rasool Berry: Wow.

Mali Music: And I'm just like fumbling. I'm hoping someone just field goals me. And a car drives by, "Kortney Pollard?" It's one of the football moms that recognizes me, takes me in. My parents hear that I'm there and they retrieve me.

And my dad treated me different every day since. He said anything my son will fight me for, I'll support. And by the time I brought Myspace up on my mom's office computer, my page had exploded. Between I hate you, no music available and forward on there, I was like, wait, over a million people listen between the time you beat my butt to here. What?

And then my mom says, Mali, this is incredible. I remember her pulling the computer to her face. She never stopped looking at the numbers since. She just

was amazed at the stats. And I didn't know how to read them. So, my mom began to breed and change into like a managerial position. She stopped mothering all together and just became like a general.

Like, well, son, hey, are you just going to do what you got to do? Where is it? Miami. Okay. Where did they say Jacksonville or whatever? Give me the phone number. I'll literally hear her like, yes, Mr. . . . okay, cool. Boom, boom. I'm like, wow. That'll turn into contracts. The front room would turn into an office and then it will be one book called *Music Managing for Dummies 101*, turn into another role into another shelf as she just would become this iron man of managerial thing saying, hold it right there.

Have you heard Mali Music? Then sit down and be prepared. You know, she just became a machine. So my mom said we should do a concert. I said, okay. She said we should release these songs. I practiced my band every day, maybe for two years. The only days they had off was Sundays because we worshiped God. But we rehearsed constantly for hours and we didn't need to have a concert because that's too late to be prepared. So, I brought the football training mentality to my music and they said I was a bit of a tyrant. And we lived off of that up until this day, man.

Rasool Berry: Wow. We need to take a deep breath after all that you shared. Because it's quite an amazing and dramatic turnaround from that night of confrontation with your dad to, like, the embrace.

Mali Music: When I was keeping a secret, I showed my mom and dad, right? And it wasn't a secret no more. And so from there, my mom got my passcode. And then she began to just go on the messages. Cause I would get scared at the messages that I would see like, hey, this is from Miami. How much did it get you to come here? Hey, we're from Connecticut. How much did it get you to come?

Rasool Berry: Was there like a definitive moment of reconciliation with your dad or did it just like. . .

Mali Music: Oh yes! Anything that my son will fight me for I support is the, boom. He was different since. *The Second Coming* came right after that. And he just was sitting back watching, just not knowing, but he was just so supportive, and he never doubted.

Rasool Berry: Yeah.

Mali Music: And it was crazy because he supported it with money. He was like soul capital provider of stuff that we're doing because I wasn't with the label. But now I have friends and me, and I have photo shoots, and I'm going to travel where you think we get money from.

Rasool Berry: Wow. And let me tell you, I was just talking to our producer, uh, reminiscing about the crescendo of enthusiasm that surrounded *The Second Coming* when it came out. As somebody that was working with college students at the time who were, you know, loving God and wanting to see something express who they were, not just spiritually, but also musically, that was inventive. That was revolutionary. And they were like, you got to hear this. You're sounding like that was the kind of momentum and type of way that you were hearing all over.

Mali Music: I felt blessed because I was living in the South when the South was busing. So, I took up the musical responsibility as gospel. We going to get this thing out.

Rasool Berry: Yeah. And at the same time, you know, the album has you with like headphones and like this kind of beat machine, turntable situation. So you had this one particular line and probably what was seen as the iconic song on *The Second Coming*, the line where you say, "I got the light. Stop trying to figure me out."

And that line to me said something more than just something that was a cool lyric, but really that spoke to a key part of who you are. Who is Mali Music. Tell me a little bit about that line and the significance to who you are.

Mali Music: It'll be a waste of time if we have 10 minutes and you're trying to find out who I am without listening to my songs. And that's what I wanted to say to people. Like guys, you're listening to my music because I communicate in songs. I wrote recently in my journal, I lose something when I become an idea. Because when you have an idea, it's created in your mind, and you don't need me. You have the idea of me created by you. So you always will be comforted by your version of me without actually knowing authentic me. Right?

Rasool Berry: Right. So, *Second Coming* comes out and at some point, I mean, obviously it does what it does. It makes a lot of noise. What's like the next milestone?

Mali Music: See the *Second Coming* was meant to be. Because remember I had the coming first, that little gray, white and black teaser album, which was just me and my mom releasing the songs that I had on Myspace on a hard copy to

whoever didn't have Myspace. And it ended up being the world. So, we're licking envelopes and sending it out. That's *The Coming*.

Rasool Berry: Right.

Mali Music: So now there will be seeds that went everywhere. So now from these crazy events of me just being so aggressive with music and my football appeal. Mr. Dale gets in contact with my music from somebody playing my stuff for him. And he travels to Savannah, Georgia at the football practice to hear one of my rehearsals that I told everybody I was doing every day. So, he sat in my rehearsal. We did a whole show just for him. And he ended up telling my mom why he came. And that we were overqualified for it.

So afterwards he began to express that he was a part of Three Six Mafia. They had this big hip hop deal where they had to release a group album, and then they have personal albums, solo albums that they were released in the deal, and that will make up the full album. They released the group joint, and they had that big song from it. And in between that three of the members died.

Tragically and darkly right in front of Mr. Dale. So now Mr. Dale is terrified, shocked from all of it. Gives his life to God because he's afraid of everything that's going on. He just is like God, I've seen, man, these people that I just ran with that we was claiming all this. . . like God, I get down on my knees. I'll do anything. So now he's devoted to making big sentiment to God, gospel, holiness, to be able to clarify any type of darkness.

You get what I'm saying? And to also put the word forward. So now Mr. Dale is this diehard preacher in Tennessee. From this rap group, Three Six Mafia, that's shocking people because he preaches so hard, but he's seeing the death. And he got the deal, and he got the industry. So, I loved that. So, I connected to him heavy.

Fast forward that he comes to Savannah. So now he hears it what's going on with me. And we connect and my album *Second Coming* was released as a hip-hop album to the world because it was qualified as one of the solo albums under the Three Six Mafia record deal. So that's how the whole world got to hear my album because it filled in one of the solo slots of one of the deceased members of the group. All the label that they were under needed to do was distribute something that sold and nothing sold like *Second Coming*.

Rasool Berry: Wow.

Mali Music: So now I got all this respect in the hip hop world. I got all this grungy coverage from Mr. Dale who like, yo, don't talk about this dude. He just dropped the album. So, then they started making all this noise. It's selling right now. It's selling right now under like a hip-hop genre. So already I didn't belong to gospel. On a category of shells from the beginning. Wow. And I wasn't marketed where none of my colleagues were. I was like marketed where God knows how. That was just the craziest thing. And then I had powers that weren't pushing gospel music, pushing my product.

So like, they don't even know to think of me as gospel because hip hop is under my name. So nobody that was receiving the light thought it was gospel at first. Nobody cared. Then that's when it came this weird thing. Now the church cared by the time it gets to song six or seven and Yahweh and all that. Come on now. Oh, the church got their hands up. But between I hate you, where they wasn't sure about what was going on, the light, I was introducing the kingdom to the people. I want to introducing us to the people. They were listening to it

Rasool Berry: Okay. So. I love that listening to it wrong.

Mali Music: Like do you get what I'm saying?

Rasool Berry: Right. Like, what do you think is the lesson in that for believers or for the church?

Mali Music: You got to trust God, man. You got to trust God. And I just love that music is just going to be connected to what God is doing. I was singing those songs and I put out everything that I could.

Rasool Berry: Right. One of the criticisms that oftentimes when people who break out of the sacred secular divide, that these artificial walls that we put up, is that it feels like, well, but they not just impacting people like the old ways that we used to do it is. What has been, maybe, elements or aspects of connection, of influence, that you've seen that you're like y'all have no idea how me flowing in this way where I'm not compartmentalizing myself, but I'm exposing it out that it's influencing people. What have been some of your own experiences and moments where you kind of hang your hat on that and go that's just a reminder of that same type of influence that I was hoping what happened when I was on that Myspace?

Mali Music: Wow. Wow. Wow, man You I cannot complain. And I've had so much like success, mostly in things that I didn't expect it or know even came with it. Because my success would be if I could just get this accurately created and to the people unchanged, that's a success. But I didn't think about there was

a result of me getting them that quality content. I would get questioned since the *Moving On* Grammy opportunity. And then I would release *Miracle* and people would say, you know, Mali, are you past your prime? I remember being asked that. Are you past your prime?

Wow. I guess I've been doing this so long. They ready for me to start going down, you know. He has to stop at some point, you know. It's the unanimous vote. But I'm going to continue to give it all. And it never was about my power. The line after Stop trying to figure me out is it ain't me y'all

Rasool Berry: It ain't me. What a powerful recognition of God's work in Mali's life. From his calling to reach people with his music, through the conflicts it took to get there, and to the recognition and impact he is having today, Mali sees that it has been God working through him at every step.

This is *Where Ya From?*. I'm Rasool Barry. And remember, it's not just about where you're at. It's also about where you're from. This show was produced by Daniel Ryan Day, Ryan Clevenger, and Jade Gustafson, and was engineered by Gabrielle Bowerd and Kevin Burgess. I also want to thank Chriscynethia and Londa for their help in supporting and promoting *Where Ya From?*.

Thanks, y'all.