

Student artist rejects commodification of music

By Kirsten Abbey

For J2311

Every day, Ohio University student Jalen Tolbert attends classes that emphasize listening to others. As a communication studies major, Tolbert is constantly learning how to effectively articulate his thoughts and opinions. Then, depending on the day, Tolbert will listen as a member of the judicial panel of the Student Senate. Over the weekend, he may be found at a speech and debate tournament where he will advocate for an issue of his choosing. Every single activity that Tolbert chooses to participate in revolves around the use of words as expression, including making music.

At 21 years old, Tolbert has been making music for seven years. Growing up in a religious household in Dayton, Ohio, he was always listening to gospel music. The introduction of secular music marked an important point in Tolbert's life, and he began making rap music his freshman year of high school under the stage name J-Tolb. Music became an important way to voice his opinions as a creative outlet. "I just want to be able to create stuff. I just want to always be scratching that itch in my brain and fulfilling that need. I feel like if you if you don't, then it's just an empty void," Tolbert said.

The music process for him is one of inspiration. When the feeling hits him, he writes it down, regardless of its musical potential.



On April 6, 2023, Jalen Tolbert performed at The Union.

Photo: Breanna Reidl

Tolbert regards his connection to lyrics as one rooted in writing poetry. "I'll just write and write and write and write. Sometimes it's terrible, because of course, it's not always going to be good. I'm not some mastermind. I wish," Tolbert said. The foundation of poetry in his work is partially what inspired the title of his first album, "Poems Over Instrumentals," which came out on March 23.

Although he intends to pursue higher education, Tolbert says that he will never stop wanting to make music. His overall ambition is that he can be in a position to advocate in every way he chooses, whether it be for students as a professor or in front of an audience as a musician.

As much as Tolbert loves making music, he still openly critiques the industry and culture that encompasses music in America. "Music is so commodified. I wish that the connotation and the way that we viewed music was less business spaced," he said. It is because he views music purely as artistic communication that he struggles with the conceptions surrounding what he makes and performs, especially because he creates rap music, "It's disrespected as an art form, and we're not really talking about it as an art form," Tolbert said.

While Tolbert appreciates that people want to show up to his performances and queue his music on Spotify, the way they treat his content leaves him frustrated.

People around him hear him, but they are not listening. According to Tolbert, when people compliment him, it's always on the standard of putting other artists down. He said that people will say things like "You really are talking about things that most people aren't talking about. Especially when it comes to rap music and it kind of has these racial undertones. Sometimes it's kind of micro-aggressive or backhanded compliments," according to Tolbert.



Photo: Breanna Reidl

It is doubly true for the non-supporters. On April 6, Tolbert was a part of a rap show that took place at The Union, a bar on campus. Tolbert explained that it was difficult to get this venue to agree to let them perform. This is ironic due to the long history of The Union supporting student artists, and Athens itself could be considered a hub for live music. It appears that the line is drawn for rappers, and the restrictions created an uncomfortable environment for the performers said Tolbert. "I didn't love it. But you know, thankful for the opportunity, and I'm glad that it did go well. "But like I said, you can't help but think and wonder if this is how they are with



Photo: Breanna Reidl

everybody," Tolbert said in reference to the behavior of The Union show operators.

The lack of support relates to the disrespect of rap, of which, according to Tolbert have racial undertones. Rap music was pioneered by Black artists and has continuously faced opposition from the public. For Tolbert there is a fundamental misunderstanding of this genre, "When we're talking about music it's like this beautiful thing. People are telling their stories and are expressing themselves. But when we're talking about rap music, we're not really thinking about how somebody is talking about some very traumatic events in their life and how they're essentially selling their trauma," Tolbert said. "We should be sharing, we should be looking to incorporate anything and everything and have everybody's voices be heard."

Inherently, that is what makes the consumption of his art so difficult for Tolbert. In his music, he describes very personal stories. Tolbert describes performing the intense and vulnerable topics his songs revolve around in front of people as surreal. Braden Cano a 21-year-old music production major, has worked closely with Tolbert when making music. As an artist, Tolbert is "very aware of his surroundings and very emotionally intelligent," according to Cano. "Whether he knows it or not, he knows what he's doing."

Although Tolbert rejects the ideology that music is for profit only and grapples with the misinterpretation of his intentions, he will continue to create. He feels fully able to express himself when making music and believes it to be a way to not only share his opinions and feelings, but a way to bolster others.

"I think that's something that we lose sight of at times because we get so used to using our voice to empower ourselves and uplift ourselves," Tolbert said. "I think it's almost, if not even more important to do so for others as well."