

## Xiuhtezcatl Martinez: Break Free by Kari Auerbach

PUBLISHED IN WINTER 2018

For the last 11 years, Xiuhtezcatl Martinez has been in the public eye for his activism, movement building, work with Earth Guardians, and youth empowerment. In 2013, President Obama awarded Xiuhtezcatl the United States Community Service Award. Xiuhtezcatl was the youngest of 24 national change-makers chosen to serve on the president's youth council. He is the recipient of the 2015 Peace First Prize; the 2015 Nickelodeon Halo Award; the 2016 Captain Planet Award; the 2016 Children's Climate Prize in Sweden; and the 2017 Univision Premios Agente de Cambio Award. He has addressed the UN General Assembly, given TED Talks, been interviewed by Bill Maher, and made an appearance on the Daily Show with Trevor Noah—all by the age of 17. Currently, he is one of 21 young plaintiffs suing the U.S. government for violating our constitutional rights by perpetuating the climate crisis in the trial of the century: *Juliana vs. the United States*. He has authored *We Rise: The Earth Guardians Guide to Building a Movement That Restores the Planet*, and just released his first album, *Break Free*.

**Kari Auerbach** How old were you when you first started writing music? What was the impetus or catalyst for doing that?

**Xiuhtezcatl Martinez** I started writing songs when I was maybe seven or eight years old. I started picking up the piano and teaching myself how to play. I had teachers that tried to teach me theory and how to read notes, but I wasn't really interested in that piece of it. Then, I found a teacher that would write out and annotate the songs that I was composing. From there, that's how I learned how to read and compose my own music, and I started writing lyrics shortly afterward. I've always been very interested in writing, literature, and poetry.

Hip-hop had always played a significant role in the way I view music culture. When I was eight, I got my first hip-hop album—*Stay Human* by Michael Franti. It was the first time I ever heard hella positive, conscious, radical, political hip-hop in a really beautiful, signed package like that. It was very influenced by funk and soul. I was interested in music at that young age, and all my siblings were artists—either singers, songwriters, rappers—so I had influence around me in my family.

Really getting into actually writing a lot of my own songs? I was probably eleven or twelve. That was just from going out and starting to play shows and show people my art. It was an interesting beginning because initially, the music was just an outlet and a tool to talk about the causes that I had grown up being very involved in. Music became a place in

which my voice was my own, and it didn't necessarily have to do with the movements that I was always supporting. I found sovereignty and independence in my art. And that's definitely, I think, what made a transition from music being just kind of another way I talk about different issues, to something that was actually defining who I was becoming and was allowing me to have a different space to communicate and express through my art.

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Kari When did you decide to make a full length record, Break Free, and what role do you think your activism played in the making of this record?

Xiuhtezcatl I started writing some of these songs as early as 2014, and I began to make beats on my laptop with GarageBand and Pro Tools (software). Since I played keys, I would program all my own synth parts, melodies and piano.

I really began to craft the album in 2017 when I brought a good buddy of mine in, Richard Vagner, who's a very talented instrumentalist and producer I actually met at the Democratic National Convention. We started writing music together, and we invited other producers to work on the sound and vibe of the project. Me, my sister, and my little brother had written the foundation of a lot of this. My sister, you hear her voice through the project, has had a very significant impact on the way I write music, and she helped craft a lot of these songs. Over the course of a year and a half, each song was rewritten, restructured, and reproduced.

My identity and my life as an activist has a very specific energy that people associate me with. In many parts of my life, I saw it as definitely putting me in a box in the way people saw me and my story. People didn't understand the complexity and diversity of what I

was fighting for or the way I wanted to use my voice to influence change.

Kari ...or even that there was a real person behind those messages.

Xiuhtezcatl Exactly! When I first started making this record, I was like, “Yo, this is a movement album. This is going to be for the people out there experiencing oppression and injustice—people fighting pipelines, people at the forefronts of police brutality, and young people going through these different things—to call them to action to break free.” And then I realized that breaking free—that was a process I went through by making this record.

Kari Breaking out of the box a little bit.

Xiuhtezcatl Exactly. Completely breaking out of the box of how the world sees me and reclaiming my story, telling it myself through my lyrics and every song in a different way. It was healing. The activism was actually the antagonist of the story in Break Free, and the music was what helped pull me through people’s perceptions of my identity and find it for myself.

I see the album as a coming of age—a reflection on the last eighteen years of my life as an activist in these movements about social and climate justice, identity, and indigenous rights. From my own perspective, I’ve taken the story that the world knows and composed it through this music so that it’s out there in the world, and I never have to repeat myself again to tell my story.

Kari Each song is its own little story and it makes the album so beautifully cohesive. I love that you sing in English, Spanish, and the Central American language Nahuatl (pron. Nah-wat). From the opening track, ‘Tiahuiliz / Light,’ would you translate a couple lines for me? “Tinexcayu totiuh xochime. Tinexcayu totiuh cuicame.”

Xiuhtezcatl It’s an old Nahuatl poem that my father taught me. It means, “At the least we have left flowers. At the least we have left songs.” The rest of the poem in the intro song goes on to explain a little bit; it’s a reflection on legacy. The beauty of the culture of our people is not in the temples or the buildings or the libraries or the greatness of our empires. The beauty of our culture is in the flowers and the songs that we have left behind and that we pass on from generation to generation. At the very least, what we have left behind is flowers and songs, and that is where the beauty and the lifeline of our culture lies.

Kari Could you tell us about the current status of the lawsuit you’ve taken up that’s been brought to the Supreme Court? You just had an important meeting and won the right to keep proceeding. Any new news beyond that?

Xiuhtezcatl No new news. The Trump Administration placed an administrative stay. We were going to go to trial October 29th, but due to the processing of the administrative stay, it was postponed. The Supreme Court then denied the Trump administration’s request to place the stay. So now in the following months, we’re going to be getting the final court date.

Kari So that was a pretty huge victory?

Xiuhtezcatl Yeah, it’s huge. Every step of the way that Trump has gone to try to dismiss, deny or stall this lawsuit, it’s been turned around by every judge that’s seen it because

they're playing dirty. They're trying to pull all kinds of things out of their bag that are not protocol, that are very shady. We have the legal system on our side, and I believe that we'll prevail through the court.

Kari In the political climate right now we've heard words like patriotism and nationalism circulating; in this context, what does the term 'global citizen' mean to you, and do you consider yourself a global citizen?

Xiuhtezcatl I definitely consider myself a global citizen, and the way I interpret that is somebody who understands our place in the world and understands themselves in the context of something much greater than any one of us. I think there is power in understanding where we come from, understanding who we are, understanding how place plays a role in our identity, but also not allowing that to limit the ways in which we interact with the world. A global citizen is somebody who lives without allowing borders to limit the way we view other people, the way we view ourselves, or the ways we choose to impact the world around us.

Kari In what ways do you think activism, music, and touring can promote these ideas of global citizenship?

Xiuhtezcatl Walk it how you talk it. You're out there speaking about these things and it's like, how are you going to act and how are you going to live and how are you going to do those things in your lives? Touring and playing shows and making music and putting out albums—the music is going to reflect the person you are. The music that I put out is going to be a reflection of the kind of life that I'm living—the way that I tour and the kind of transportation I choose, these different things are examples. When you're on that stage, you have a platform. People are listening to you. They're in a different space than when you're giving a keynote or when they're watching a YouTube video of me at the United Nations or giving a TED Talk. When you're in front of an audience of people, their hearts are opened. They're ready to celebrate and to cut loose, and sometimes I just forget about all the bull. If you're there, how can you uplift and inspire those people to take something away from that show more than just a good night? How can you make that ride into something that people learn from and something people are inspired to come back to? Because people don't always remember the show. They remember the experience and the energy that they felt. If you can capture and create an energy that is above the status quo, then you're going to create spaces where people want to come and engage and be a part of your community. A fan base, that's about building family, building a community. That's what this music is about for me, that's what I want to create. Yes, I want to be incredibly successful and make music that has mainstream appeal, that's part of the goal, but I also want to pull people in and create a community around the art that I've made. I've seen artists do it successfully, and it's incredibly inspiring when they've done that.

Kari Another thing that was inspiring was that new MTV Generation Change awards. I think it's such a great thing for a behemoth like MTV to be shining a spotlight on young people who are changing the world. What are your thoughts on your nomination and that experience?

Xiuhtezcatl It was cool to go out there, and it was the first time they ever gave out this award, the MTV-EMA Generation Change award. Coming home winning that award was something I'm definitely proud of, and I'm excited to see, as you said, a mainstream platform like MTV support the voices of young people doing good work. As an activist and as an artist, I was out there double hustling, making connections, kicking it with industry

people like Sway Calloway—he's the voice for one of the most influential radio shows in hip-hop, Shade45 on SiriusXM. He presented me with the award. Afterward, we were talking and he was like, "Yeah man, I heard your song, get your bars up.\*" A lot of young artists blow up on the show so I'm like, I'm ready. I'm ready to go and make that happen.

Kari That's a way that your activism helped with your music, for sure.

Xiuhtezcatl The way I see it, the activism was a platform that gave me worldwide recognition before I even dropped an album, so it gave me wings and then I had to teach myself how to fly.

Kari When I first listened to Break Free, it reminded me of Zack de la Rocha (of Rage Against the Machine). He once explained his music by saying "Revolution songs are love songs," and he classified every single Rage Against the Machine song as such. I get that feeling in your music, but the tone, the sounds, the vibe, the stylings are completely different. Who influences and inspires you musically?

Xiuhtezcatl As far as archetypes that have been making waves with their art in a revolutionary sense, Zack de la Rocha in Rage Against the Machine has been someone that we look up to. As far as influences, sonically I think I listened to a lot of Talib Kweli and Black Star when I was twelve, thirteen, fourteen, and just studied, studied, studied his lyrics and his rhyme schemes and his patterns for production and just the sounds that I wanted to capture too. I listened to a lot of J. Cole's records, and that's kind of the direction I want to steer toward. The way that J. Cole does it, there's such a storytelling component to a lot of his songs. It's all very connected sonically, very big orchestral sounds like choirs. Chance the Rapper in his Coloring Book album did really well tying the whole album together through the live gospel choir sound.

Besides Chance the Rapper, J. Cole, Kendrick Lamar, and Logic, now I look to some newer artists like Amine, Smino, and Noname—three young artists that are in a somewhat independent land of hip-hop, doing things differently than a lot of the other mainstream artists. I admire their platform and the creative way that they present their art. It's been a lot of learning and a lot of studying. KRS-One was the teacher; I see him not even as an artist, but as a teacher that has represented a lot of the culture.

Kari You mentioned Richard Vagner, you mentioned your sister Isa, you wanna give a shout out to anybody else who helped out on the record?

Xiuhtezcatl Brian Harding, the one and only, the star maker. He produced the record. He's worked on over 500 gold and platinum records in his career and done a bunch of work in the music industry in Nashville and LA, producing for different people like India Arie, Outcast, and Guns and Roses. He's kind of abandoned the music industry and started just doing projects that he fell in love with, that he was passionate about. He helped me grow, he helped me discover my voice, he helped teach me how to record and how to use and understand my voice, my flow, and how to tell stories—not just with the lyrics, but with the inflections of my vocals and the tonality I put behind the songs. It really helped shape a lot of the original beginnings of me growing up as a real artist.

Xi-Tika is a producer that I worked with on the project, incredibly talented young producer that helped bring all the drum sounds.

My mamma, shouts to my mom. She's been holding the dollars, supporting me. It's been really a lot. I've never, ever lived my life in one lane. Having a significant presence in the

world of environmentalism has taken up and consumed a lot of my time and my energy and what I've been all about. Now, transitioning towards music and using music for a platform to talk about these same things, it's a really interesting process to go through that transition period. Now my vision is bigger than ever for both worlds. I'm just constantly on the move, it's a beautiful life. I'm very grateful.

Kari This record is such a milestone on your personal journey to yourself, your authentic self. What themes might we find in the next record?

One Day features vocals by Isa Roske, XiuhtecatI's sister, who he credits with helping to craft many of the songs on 'Break Free'.

XiuhtecatI I'm finishing the second record now. All of it will be recorded, mixed, and mastered by December. That's the vision. I have two records coming that are in the process of completion over the next two or three months. It's going to be very different sounds. The production is going to change for sure and that's going to influence the vibe of the record a lot. And it's going to be something that I think a lot more young people vibe with and are going to be engaging with. It's going to surprise a lot of people, and certain people are definitely not going to expect it, but I think it's going to be such an authentic reflection of where I am right now with the music and the creativity. I went to Spain and wrote the body of the third album there and then already came back and started dropping vocals in studios in San Francisco, so it's going to be a completely different energy. Lots of trap\* sounds and talking about a lot of these same things. It's a different form of reflection when the sounds are different, but it's a lot of the same themes of diving into colonization, identity, self-reflection, and life balance, guidance, my relationship with my dad—all these different things, diving really deeply into that. The energy and the maturity of the music is continuing to grow where the sound is just going in a different direction.

That's just for the next project though. I don't want to make another album like Break Free. I think that's going to be the only one of its kind, and the rest are going to continue to evolve and take new shapes. It's interesting. I think one cool model is Logic. He has the EPs that he puts out, the Bobby Tarantino's (Bobby Tarantino & Bobby Tarantino II) and those have a heavy trap vibe, and then he just put out Young Sinatra IV which is all boom-bap, boom-bap east coast vibe, old school hip-hop style. But then, his full length albums are his masterpieces. They have both energies in them, and they're all connected to his story and the sonic cohesiveness of the whole project. So those are three different styles you guys are going to see. It's going to be something!

Kari Well I, for one, and I'm sure the Kosmos Community, will be waiting to hear it. It sounds intriguing. You don't waste a minute! We will be looking for your future releases. I'm absolutely thrilled with this one. Thank you so much for the music, and thank you for taking the time to speak with us.

XiuhtecatI I certainly appreciate the platform, the opportunity, all the good questions, and all the love you've been sharing with the album, all the reflection. I see you're definitely putting energy into listening and finding your own meaning for all the songs, so I appreciate that.

Kari Well, thank you ever so much and have a great set of shows.

XiuhtecatI Yes, much love. We'll talk again soon.

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\*In hip-hop slang, bars refers to a rapper's lyrics, especially when considered extremely good.

\* Trap is a simplistic, dynamic hip-hop formula originating in the 90's, consisting of rhythm shifting percussion, rattling hi-hats, Roland TR-808 drum machine samples and a cinematic, symphonic utilization of string, brass, woodwind, and keyboard instruments to create an energetic, hard-hitting, deep, and variant atmosphere.