

Part II: Hip Hop Artist Kayvon Asemani on Building His Brand and Controlling His Destiny

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Kayvon Asemani, a native of Baltimore and a 2014 graduate of the Milton Hershey School for at-risk youth in Hershey, Pa., has a fascinating story to tell. While his young life has been marred by tragedy (explained in [Part I](#), if you missed it), he has long been guided by his passion and creativity. Today, Asemani, a Wharton junior, is a rising hip-hop star and founder of Asemani Enterprises, which includes a clothing brand.

In Part II of this two-part podcast and video, he sits down with KWHS interviewer Anthony David Williams to continue their discussion on his life, music, business and mission to motivate other young people to follow their dreams, despite the challenges they face. They kick off their talk recalling Asemani's experiences at the United Nations in August 2016, when he performed three original songs for a crowd of 1,400 people from 193 countries as part of the International Young Leaders Assembly.

An edited transcript of their conversation appears below.

Knowledge@Wharton High School: You mention this dichotomy of untapped potential and then arriving at a place like Penn. What is that like, as someone who had that untapped potential, to then [have it] tapped at the United Nations? Tell me a little bit about your experience performing at the United Nations [in the summer of 2016]. You're young in your college career, performing in front of such a sophisticated audience, which is a world stage.

Kayvon Asemani: When I think about the whole United Nations thing, it's hard to believe. I almost don't believe myself that I did it. But I've got to remind myself that we were there. It happened.

First of all, I don't know if a rapper has ever done that before. So that's a pretty big milestone for anybody who's making music. But what it really meant for me was [helping people] understand what hip hop really is. So I'm not appropriating it in any negative way. I'm not being a negative ambassador to the culture of hip hop. You've got to stay true to that. One of my main goals is to respect the craft itself and the art form.

But at the same time, [I wanted to] bring in my own background and experiences and allow this art to be able to transcend into other audiences, environments and contexts. That's why the whole rapping at the UN thing is so mind blowing because the United Nations isn't a context where you would expect somebody to go in there and rap. The reason why it meant a lot to me is because my whole idea is to bring communities together.

The funny thing was I decided not to approach it any differently than I would approach anything else, because if you think about it the idea of staying true to the culture of hip hop, bringing in my own personal story that might resonate with other people, and then uniting people together, just those three key pieces. It's the same thing I decided to do at the United Nations.

[It was] me and one of my producers, Waz. He's incredible. I could sit here for three years and talk about him — Chris,

Alex, all these guys that I work with.

KWHS: The whole crew.

Asemani: Oh yeah. It's a strong team. I'm probably the least talented person on the team. But Waz, he made a mix [for the United Nations performance]. The first part of the mix was a segment of the intro of my previous mix tape. It's called U4IC (pronounced Euphoric) and the name of the intro was also called U4IC. It's a really dark song about my situation and what happened and what it means, the first time I experienced these issues and how I saw them and how they related on the larger level. You have to listen to the song to understand what I'm saying. Then the middle part was this song called "Breakthrough" which I released a music video for a year ago. It is a more upbeat and energetic, bring-people-together song. And then at the end it was a snippet of "Rayz," and "Rayz" hadn't been released yet. And "Rayz" is a lot more like "Breakthrough" in the sense that I brought people together, but it was also more triumphant. It's more like, let's do this together. Let's come out on the other side of this together.

And then I did a little spoken word at the end of the piece to, you know, "Thank you for allowing me to be here and be a part of this movement to change the world together." And that was it. That was the performance.

I guess my biggest takeaway was that these messages of bringing people together [are] meant for everybody. Everybody's going to receive it well. And I don't think you should be afraid of the delivery mechanism, the way that you deliver that message — whether you're speaking, whether you're singing, whether you're rapping, that doesn't matter. As long as the message gets through in a way that's going to resonate with people, that it's going to last, I think that's how you're going to make the most impact.

KWHS: That's interesting. You mentioned "Rayz," [the video for your latest track]. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that. What was that like, not only just having that video produced and going through that process professionally, but what was it like afterwards seeing 100k views?

Asemani: Yeah man, that's nuts. "Rayz" that took me on a small scale — from here to here. How do I explain "Rayz?" Let me explain to you life before "Rayz," before even recording "Rayz," not even just before releasing "Rayz," but before recording "Rayz." Any time I do something like this, I've been fortunate. People have been flocking to the story, and I've gotten some good press opportunities and I've gotten to perform a lot and put out music. But when people thought Kayvon, the first thing that they thought was the story, the person, all these things that I'm saying to you. People would really gravitate towards my energy and the things that I say and my goals. And what I've done in response to my story and how I want to help other people get out of situations like that, help them through situations that are similar to [mine]. I was known as that guy. It was still a very positive connotation with the name. I was a figure in that sense.

But when it came to the music, a lot of people knew who I was. But most of them did not listen to the music. So I was like this is cool on a public figure level, just as a human being. It achieves that goal for people to know that that's what I stand for. But as far as a musician, as an artist, I want people to experience the art that I create. So one of my big goals was that I needed to make music that is going to reach people in [such a] way that when people hear Kayvon, they still think of those connotations that I just mentioned, but they think of how the music ties in with that. That was me in a nutshell. That's after freshman year and sophomore year, so it's basically halfway through my college career. Everybody knows me, but a lot of people don't know my music.

So this summer, one of the things I did was make a lot of music. I probably have 25 songs done, ready to go, ready to just be out. I could put them out tomorrow if I wanted because I just did a bunch of them over the summer and I'm still making music, with the team of course, but you know, that's just the songs that are done, like recorded and mixed and mastered and all that. That doesn't include all the songs that I've written. There's just so much product ready to be put

out.

What is going to be the product that is going to set me apart from not just being known for who I am, but also for my music? “Rayz” was one of those many songs in the session where Waz had a beat that he did a few years ago. I really liked it and I [said], “I want to do it on this beat.” I came up with the hook on the bus ride to Waz’s place. I’d already done the verses and I was working on it in the studio session and I was ready to lay it down. What Waz is really good at is melodies. He’s just unreal at adding melodies on a beat. And so he used the beat that he made a few years ago for the song, because that’s the one I wanted to rap on, but he add all these synths in there and all these musical terms that I hardly understand. These sounds made the song have so much more energy. It was while we were building the song.

I understand music theory because I used to play the trombone and things like that. But I’ll be like, “I want it to sound like duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh.” And he’ll be like, “All right.” And he’ll actually do it. And then he’ll also have his own ideas and sometimes he’ll freestyle things. But while we were just building that track, it was like wow. It’s like when you could tell something is special, that was happening. And sometimes you have those moments. A lot of moments in the studio it’s really, you know, you record and you sit there and you’re just like, “Oh, I don’t like the way that take sounded. Let me go do it again. Let’s adjust it.” It’s really tedious and a menial task. But some very special moments you’re just like, “Wow, this is going to be something.” And that’s what “Rayz” was.

And fast forward for the song. It’s past 70,000 plays. My best performing song. And it’s really hit a wave. So we get the song, that’s big. And then you get in a room with incredible video people that I know. The director’s name is Sam Cowan. He goes to Drexel, and he put a team together with two amazing executive producers.

So we’re doing that. And then we record the video during our school’s fall break, that weekend. We spend 46 hours on set. That’s the whole crew. It’s a 20-person crew behind this video. So we spend 46 hours on set. That doesn’t count all the hours you spend before in pre production and after in post production. Then we put out the video and we start promoting. One of my friends that goes here, his name is David Zow. He’s somebody you guys might want to interview too, he’s amazing. And we just start promoting it together. Like now when people talk to Kayvon, like talk to me, they talk about “Rayz”. They don’t necessarily talk about the story as much behind it, they talk about the music. And that was the goal. They talk about it.

So they’re just like, “You know, I loved your video. I loved this, this and this.” I’m getting messages. I’m getting followers. I’m getting people who don’t go here, obviously, a lot of people who don’t go to Penn, and just from all over the place, like, “Oh yeah, I saw this video @kayvonmusic whoever you are, this is amazing.” You know? I’m connecting with people that I don’t see physically, but what actual rappers do. I’m finally in that space where it’s like I’m not just a Penn rapper. I’m a real artist.

Long story short, that was exciting because now I just put out a song this week called “Icing” and it’s straight rapping. But it’s like here’s a gift, more music’s coming, just sit tight. I don’t want to go too long. And then people flock to it. People are responding to it. People are like, “Oh, this is also really good, duh, duh, duh.”

In summary, “Rayz” made me an actual artist, made people respect the craft and know what I’m capable of. And at this point, it’s just scale and we’re doing a lot of exciting things next to capitalize on it.

KWHS: In addition to this, to the music facet, I’m aware that you have your own clothing brand.

Asemani: Rocking some of it right now.

KWHS: You’re repping right now actually. And you also act as the founder and CEO of Kayvon Enterprises. Can you expound a bit on this venture? What does this initiative entail?

Asemani: Kayvon Enterprises is my holding company for all the things I work on. Kayvon Music is all my personal artistry. And under Kayvon Music you've got the songs, you've got the videos, you've got the performances. Then Kayvon Fashion is all the things I like to work on as far as the clothing. I have my own Kayvon Music merchandise that's branded as just Kayvon Music. Then I also have Hiro Soul. And the story behind this is that Kayvon Music is the logo, the lion, bear and a wolf combined into this fantasy creature. That whole thing was designed by Adam Reid, a designer who goes to Penn and is incredible. We sold those shirts and they did really well. Like spring freshman year, [we] sold 120 of them. And I was a nobody. I'm still not as big as real rappers, but that's still a lot for somebody who's just a spring freshman. That's how strong the design was. So that became my logo.

And then we [decided to start] a clothing line that's separate from the Kayvon brand, but has its own brand. I can endorse it, but a lot of people can. This brand is majority his. I'm a partial owner, but this is his line. It's the Hiro Soul [Apparel] by Adam Reid. And I wear it. I have a say in what it looks like and things like that. But he's a great visual designer. That's something I'm not really good at. I think I'm a good curator, like being able to tell you if I think it's nice. But in terms of creating it, Adam's a legend. So we create Hiro Soul. We put out beanies last year and they did really well. We sold them all. That was season one. And now season two we have these hoodies coming out and some hats too, the dad hats are in now. These are actually dropping this weekend. I'm really excited to put them out. I think people are going to like them. That's under the clothing part of [the business].

The whole Kayvon Enterprises is going to continue to expand. There are a lot of things I'm working on. Some things I'm really proud of are the social impact and for-profit sustainable solutions, but also non-profit things, just for the good of community. Right now I'm working with a team to help start this boarding school. I'm really excited about that. I'm on another initiative where Dean Furda, the dean of admissions at Penn, and I developed a Coursera program. Well, he and his team developed the program, but Chris, one of the producers I work with, and I provided some music. And I'm working with Dean [Eric] Furda to expand it, to expand the program. [It is a] how-to-apply-to-college program to a bunch of kids who need help with college access. There are 3,000 students already on the platform. I'm expanding it to my high school. And I'm going to help expand that elsewhere.

KWHS: With all of your experience, do you have any advice for young, budding high school students who are interested in music and even entrepreneurship?

Asemani: Absolutely. Take what you will from this because there's a lot that I could say, but what I'd say to whoever's out there is don't be afraid to create. The center of all these things, the people who are making impact, is they're creating something. They're creating a product or a service or an opportunity or an experience, some type of offering they're creating. It could be a brand. They're creating. And everything that they learn, everything that I've learned or people who really inspire me, everything that's influencing what we do as creators, everything that influences us in what we learn, is what we incorporate to what we do as creators. Everything I learn in the classroom, I incorporate into my business. Everything I learn in some clubs and organizations I'm in, I incorporate into my business and my product.

And by doing that, like, you can do anything. You can do anything. A lot of people say, "Oh, how do you balance it all? Can I do it all at one time?" No, you can't do it all at one time. But you can do a lot over a period of time. That's what people don't understand. One day you're not going to be able to address all these things that you're doing, but over a week or a month, you can space it out such that you can touch all those things. And when you're on break from school and you're not taking classes because you're on break? I made 25 tracks over the summer. I don't have to make a track during the school year and still have product coming out every other week if I wanted to. Right? So there's that component of it.

But I think the other thing that it really allows you to avoid is this idea of wanting to be a part of this exclusive brand or exclusive club that isn't yours. A lot of people struggle with rejection from applying to something that's very selective. Or they try to get in some club they don't get in, they try to get in some school that they don't get in, or whatever. And

it's like if you're going to let something that you can't control impact the way that you feel, you're not going to get very far. I've been rejected from plenty of clubs, organizations, programs, you name it. But another really strong piece of advice I have for them is to never set a goal where you don't control the outcome. It shouldn't be, "I want to win the race," it should be, "I want to run under a six-minute mile." Right? Because if you're going to set goals for yourself that are higher than what anybody else expects of you or expects of themselves, you're going to stand out. And the thing that's going to be most impressive about you is what you've built. What you've built. Obviously it's your brand, but how you've incorporated other people, how have you impacted other people's lives? How have you made the things that you've learned real?

And the last thing I'll say is we live in a world where nobody is the center of the objective universe. Instead, everybody is the center of their own subjective universe and they choose which influencers and social ecosystems impact them. And all of these social ecosystems are interrelated. You can't affect whether or not the election is going to affect you. Obviously the election is going to affect you in some way, right? You can't affect how the principal of your high school, the president of your club or your university, you can't change the fact that that's going to affect you, but you can choose what's going to influence you, right? And as a human being who sees all these social influencers coming into your news feed, so to speak, you have to pick what you're going to take from each of these things and how you're going to react.

And for me as an artist, as a brand builder, as a quote/unquote creator, is what I'm advising a lot of these kids to embrace. You have to understand that you're just one very small part of all the things that are impacting the people you're trying to target. You're one very small part. So you've got to figure out how you're going to reach those people, how you're going to be the most relevant in their experience to help solve their goals and address these issues. And I think once you do that, really essentially around building the strongest brand you can build, you're going to have the most success for yourself, but most importantly you're going to have the most success on the people around you.

KWHS: Well, good luck, to the high school students and to you. I'm really excited to expect more music. Thank you so much for joining us today.