

EPISODE 1162

“SW: What I did realize was that all of my talents are assets. All of them.”

[INTRODUCTION]

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FT: Our guest today is as prolific as he is talented. Steven Wallace is a singer and composer from Chicago. His professional expertise incorporates a plethora of genres and styles from soul, hip-hop, blues and classical. In the span of his career, he's released 15 of his own albums independently as an artist, produced, performed and written on over a 100 albums, with credits including Wu Tang Clan, De La Soul. This month, he releases his first feature length film called Hal King. It's actually a film musical, distributed by Gravitass Ventures. It was released on February 9th.

The film is set in a late 1950s jazz era, Midwestern town, modernizing and musicalizing William Shakespeare's Henry the IV and V. I wanted to have Steven on to talk about how to make it as an artist. You just heard him discuss how he has been able to cultivate, perfect and leverage so many skills. If you are a painter, you don't just put color to Canvas. There is so much more to you, that you can monetize when you don't sell the art piece, or when you're having a slower year.

Artists are inherently multi-talented, and that is part of our conversation, but also, how to make a film in the COVID era, how to finance a film, how to staff it, how to gain support. Steve also shares anecdotes from his journey throughout his career, throughout his career as an artist, some of the rejection he's faced and what that has taught him about, being more in control of your career. Here's Steven Wallace.

[INTERVIEW]

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FT: Steve Wallace, welcome to So Money.

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SW: Thank you. Good to be here, Farnoosh.

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FT: I'm excited to connect and learn a lot more about the behind the scenes of theater and film, especially in the age of COVID. It must be a really hard time. You have proven triumphant during these months, and now going on a year with the debut of your film, which we're going to talk about Hal King, but also the journey to bringing this to life as a very talented person who as you described before we were recording, faced racial challenges. You're willing to talk about that, which I appreciate would love for you to mention some of those hurdles and how you overcome that. How does it feel to have your film out? By the way, everyone, the movie is called Hal King. You can check it out Hal King the movie and distributed widely. First, tell us how are you feeling?

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SW: It's like right before giving birth. I have a daughter, she's eight. The feeling I had before my wife gave birth to my daughter is similar to now. It's a lot of work heading up to it, then you know you still got a lot of work to do. You know what I mean? You're super excited and you're like, you can't wait to see people be like, "Oh, she's so cute. Oh." Then do all this stuff. At the same time, you're like, "Okay."

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FT: Then you live in fear for the rest of your life. I get it.

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SW: Right. No, no, no. Not at all. It was like, "Okay, now what do we do with this being that was placed into our lives?"

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FT: Much like bringing a child to life, there is an incubation process. There is nine months for a child, but it sounds to me like this movie, this film is the culmination of years of hard work and sweat and planning and plotting. Give us the summary of what helped bring this film to life, and tell us even along the way, some of the challenges that you faced.

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SW: Sure. Sure. I mean, I wrote on social media that it was literally my blood, sweat and tears. People say that, but I realized through this film that it had to happen. A lot of money came out of our pocket, me and me and my wife's pockets. A lot of dealing with ego shots presenting to people and they were like, "This will never work. You'll never do this." Those types of conversations, and just having to just a sweat equity of doing the things that need to be done on set, running up and down stairs, things that other people weren't willing to do making that happen.

Then even after all the fun was done on the set, and everybody was like, "Yay, we made a movie and stuff," really just seeing it through, even after the point of it's being edited, playing for people and they say, "Yeah, but I don't like this. I don't like that," and editing more. After everyone, it seemed like there was nothing else. There was a ram in the bushes and seeing, going through the whole process of finally getting a distribution deal.

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FT: Just to share with listeners, what is the movie we're talking about? This is Hal King, groundbreaking new feature length hip-hop, R&B musical. I'm reading on soultracks.com, which gives a glowing review. It's set in the late 1950s jazz era Midwestern town. The film modernizes and musicalizes Shakespeare's Henry the IV and Henry the V, through the iconic character of young Hal. When did you produced this, create this? Did COVID impact the process?

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SW: Well, it may have impacted it in a positive way. We created and produced all of the stuff way before COVID. We were done filming. Well, I have to say before COVID. I won't give everything away. I'll tell you, the idea started for me, probably over a decade ago. I had a dream that I feel like, God gave me this dream of I saw Usher the singer, Usher. He had jeans and Timberlands on, but he had a poet shirt from the 19th century and he was running through a battlefield.

I woke up from the dream and I said, "What does that mean?" At the same time, I knew exactly what it meant. With my background, I was trained as a classical opera singer. Also, I was raised around hip-hop and R&B. I've always wanted to find something, because I've worked in both areas and just stayed in those areas. I want to find a way to bridge the gap. I saw so many similarities in a storytelling that I thought would be really fascinating to see how to bring those things together. I knew when I got the dream, I was like, "Okay, this is it." I started trying to pull some people together to make it what it is today.

I oversaw the whole process. Once I got all the lyrics and stuff together, I just wrote music for the whole thing. I wanted to try to keep that modern and classical feel throughout the whole thing.

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FT: I want to get into how you did this financially, investing your own money. First, let's go back a little bit and talk about what you were telling me before we were recording, which is that throughout your career, you faced challenges, because of your race, and whether that was not being hired for certain projects, in certain roles. You ask yourself for a question with four words, which I love. I think we all have this moment, when we feel we don't have a lot of power. There's not much we can control, but yet, there is. The question is, what can I do?

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SW: Yeah.

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FT: First, talk about some of these challenges that you faced. Was this what can I do mindset, pretty constant for you?

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SW: I think it was something that bubbled up to the surface after different things happen. I'm always trying to think, yeah, I mean, what can I do is the question, especially in my life as an artist, I'm always trying to figure out what is it that I can do? How can I fulfill myself and connect with the core of who I am as a person, even beyond being an artist, and let the art come from that?

Well, the thing that happened to me, just some of the personal experiences. When I first auditioned for colleges, one of my – the school that I actually initially went to was Illinois State University. There were some professors there when I first auditioned that were saying, “Oh, his voice is to gospely.” I had sung some classical music when I audition, but there was a black professor that was on staff there, Dr. Alphonse Anderson. He was like, “No, that doesn't make any sense. He's got the voice to do this.” Just having somebody to help, to support that too was really key. He's the one that really got me into the idea of singing opera. I wasn't really into that. at first. I was more R&B, hip-hop.

Then I'd say, I knew about some classical things here and there, jazz definitely. He really opened me up to the idea, which exposed me to the art of musical storytelling on stage, which includes musical theater and so forth. Going through auditioning with opera, I auditioned for the Metropolitan Opera when I was 21, or 22. A couple times, actually. There was this one year and I'll just be brief with this. One of the things that they tell you is if they ask you to sing three pieces, then you're moving to the next level, you know what I mean? That was a thing.

There was one other person they asked. There was a lady, the soprano. She sang three pieces. I was the only other person they asked out of everyone to sing three pieces, and I felt really good about my performance that day. There was another tenor who sang, who was white. He cracked the entire – he was cracking while he was singing. When they finally announced who

was going to the next stage of the auditions, it was the lady who sang the three pieces, and it was the tenor who cracked.

I was in shock. I mean, I was like, "What's going on here?" I talked to the judges afterwards and they were – One of them was like, "Look." She just gave me this look, like I understood. "Because it was some choices that were beyond my personal control. I understand your frustration." It was confirmation to me in that. I've had other situations, where maybe you go to audition for something, for a role, and other people go in that you know don't have the level of skill or expertise that you have. I noticed, a lot of arts is weird, because it can be so subjective, you know what I mean?

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FT: But a voice cracking? I'm sorry.

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SW: Yeah. Right.

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FT: That is the opposite of what you want to happen in an audition for a role.

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SW: It was it was a big crack. It wasn't a little-little flub. It was like, "Ooh." I mean, there's things like that that happen. Even to the point, I was in a role with a company. The conductor was looking at me when I was singing. The first time I met the conductor, and he came in. I sing through the piece, we were all practicing. It was all pretty new for us. He was looking at me rubbing his head, like he was confused what I was doing, and made me sing the whole thing again, and did the same thing. He moved on.

Throughout the whole process, he made it harder and harder for me to exist within just – I already had the role I was in the piece. I was performing already. To the point where I just walked away from the show, do you know what I mean?

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FT: Despite this, do you feel as though you are happy that you were a trailblazer in many ways, in that a strapping young black man who might automatically be assumed to be more of the hip-hop, R&B culture is now singing classical opera. You did turn heads, and unfortunately, some of them were not impressed, or surprised. At the same time, you did make an impact.

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SW: Yeah. Yeah, definitely. I mean, I definitely see that. I see that in younger singers that are coming up now. I think one of the most important things is that there's a mentality that comes with being able to – I'll tell you, there's an experience I had when I was in an opera with an all-black cast. It was just amazing, just to be there with people that – and I never had to worry about, if someone was telling me something, it was because I was black. It was just an amazing feeling.

I mean, as far as being a trailblazer, there's people that have done these things way before me. I mean, there's George Shirley, Roland, Hayes. As far as tenors go, and of course, Leontyne Price, Marian Anderson. I mean, people, Robin McFerrin, they've all definitely blazed those trails. I think one of the things for me, was that because I was talented in a lot of different ways, not just performing, but also creating, that it pushed me to be like, okay, I was seeing my friends. I was seeing my friends having a hard time getting roles and going through the same thing I was going through I was like, "Well, what do we do?" I can't –

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FT: You just keep quitting, or you just keep walking off? No, you have to take control.

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SW: Exactly.

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FT: That takes guts. I see that with, even with women in Hollywood, who are tired of going through the process of being judged and objectified. They become writers. They become directors. They become producers. There is so much control that comes with that. Do you want to go back to performing more? Are you more now into the behind the scenes now, because of the ability to control your destiny more?

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SW: Yeah. I am open to all of the above. Mostly because I feel talents are given by God and then developed by us through life. I think, I want to use everything that I have to try to give back to my community and to the world, to make this world ultimately a better place with my gifts. Sometimes, I feel when I'm just behind the scenes, there's an aspect of me that's not being shared, and a gift that I'm not allowing to be put on display. I want to do both situations.

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FT: Yes. Well, you do make a cameo in Hal King.

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SW: I do.

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FT: How did that come about?

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SW: That's the weird thing. I initially didn't want to be in the film at all. Not because I was camera shy or anything like that. I wanted to see other people work with the work. I had

someone that was in this role. It's a small role. It's the mediator. There's a political debate that happens at the end. There's a guy who's the mediator of the debate, a character. I had someone else who came to the studio. Oftentimes, with musicals, except for in a couple of cases, usually the way it's done, you go to the recording studio, you record your parts. When you're on the set, you lip sync. You lip sync to your voice, right?

The guy came by and recorded in the studio. They as part, it sounded great. It's like, "Man, it sounds awesome, man. Thank you, man. See you. We'll be there next Tuesday, blah, blah, blah." He's like, "All right. Cool." Shake hands. We get on set and he's just not there. Yeah. The director was like, "You need to do it, man." Because he knew I could sing. The director is a singer too. Myron Davis, shout out to him. He was like, "Man, we need to get you in a suit. You need to do this." I was like, "Okay. Cool. Let's go."

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FT: Time is money. Let's go.

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SW: Yeah. Yeah.

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FT: How did you raise money for this movie? Did you use savings? Did you crowd-funded? Did you get investors? How did it – every film is made differently, so I want to know.

[00:17:02] SW: Yeah, it was all of the above. I didn't know what I was doing at first. I talked to some organizations trying to get in larger investors. That wasn't really working. People didn't see didn't see the money in it, or they didn't know the entertainment field. I wasn't talking to the right investors. I start to go to people that had a stake in my life. It was family, friends, friends, and professors and people like that. I sat down with them. I presented a professional 20-page presentation for them and say, "This is what we're doing. This is what we have. This is the plan.

This is what we look forward towards the future,” and show them all the percentages and everything.

For the for the most part, those people, they invested in me, because it was me. They knew me. They have respect for me and seeing my talent. They wanted to invest in that, because they want to see me succeed. I did get other investors as well. There's some people that just did a Kickstarter, which did not succeed, but it did bring some attention. There were people that gave investments outside of the Kickstarter. Also, me and my wife, we put tons into this. We're the largest investor in the film.

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FT: Which is what investors like to see. They like to see the person who's developing this to be the biggest stakeholder have skin in the game. What happens from here? How do you measure the success? What is at stake?

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SW: Oh, man. I just think of, there's so much that we put into this. I mean, on a real surface level, down to the nuts and bolts, I mean, I want to make the money back for my investors and myself. That's definitely a thing. I think the success is beyond that, because I think what it is, it's an opportunity to open the door to have other conversations. I think if those conversations happen, and those opportunities are built from people seeing me accomplishing this on a very, very small budget. I mean, so small, I showed it to industry folks and they were like, “This is impossible. You cannot do a period musical on this amount of money. It's impossible.” We did it.

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FT: What inspired it besides your dream? Because when I did read the description of it, and I think, okay, this is a mix of classical history, and this is Shakespeare meets modern day. Or not even modern day, but 1950s modern. We see that with Hamilton, for example. Not to be cliché about it.

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SW: No, it's cool.

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FT: Was there inspiration from other existing musicals and creative work that we could we would all know about. That was where you got the inspiration for this?

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SW: Well, yes and no. When I started, it was before Hamilton.

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FT: Really?

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SW: Yeah. It was way before Hamilton. Actually, I had done other projects. I did an album in 2010, or something. I think it was called Street Symphony, where I sang R&B songs over these hip-hop beats that had all this classical music in it. It would be inspired, from things from operas and stuff. I would retail the story of the opera, in in a song, in a three-minute song, or that scene from the offer or, whatever. Or we recontextualize a relationship that the song was about, whatever.

I've done things like that. Then when I was in college, with that professor, Dr. Anderson, he drew a lot of black opera singers to him for obvious reasons. We used to joke around about, What would the opera sound if it was produced by Babyface or something? Or Brian McKnight, or Prince? A very versatile black artist that was multi-instrumentalist and composer. What would that sound like? We would just joke around with things that. I think a lot of black opera singers experience that too. That's a thing.

If I take it back to anything, when I was four, I used to listen to the Wiz soundtrack, the film version of the soundtrack, every day. I was super influenced by that. I mean, Quincy Jones is a master producer. I knew who to bring together to do – and I always love just to see so much black excellence in one expression, because you have Michael Jackson. It was so much going on in that film and the dancers and the sets and the costumes were interesting. That was a big, big influence for me. I guess, I always thought, if I could do something on that level of brilliance, then I feel I'm doing what I need to be doing in life.

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FT: Yes. You made a very pointed decision to make sure that your film was in a black town, with black themes and casting creative. Are you hopeful that the direction that the film industry is going is one that is more inclusive? Are you feeling more confident about that? Do you feel your place in this world, this creative world as a talent who can sing and direct and act, you have more opportunities going forward, that maybe you don't have to create, that there are going to be opportunities for you that come to you?

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SW: Yeah. I really do believe that. I think, it started – I had a composition professor, Virko Bailey, who taught me when I was in my undergrad. He was from Ukraine. He said that all great artists birthed from great turmoil. That's how I felt from how he grew up in Ukraine and what he experienced. If you look throughout history, I mean, some of the most extravagant periods of great art.

I mean, from my cultural perspective, you looking at the 60s and 70s, and what was happening, civil rights movement, 50s, 60s and 70s, and type of music that came out during that time. It was so powerful. Then hip hop, late 80s and early 90s. We all saw straight out of Compton, you know what I mean? I'm saying that to say that the death of Trayvon Martin, to me, was a tipping point, artistically, if you really look at it, because there was a lot of great films. I think Selma came out around that time, or a year or two after. Then it was a lot of really artistic expressions. Even hip-hop changed a little bit, even though there's still some other stuff that – there's a whole another podcast talking about hip hop.

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FT: Which we can do.

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SW: Yeah, definitely. I mean, I consider myself a hip-hop aficionado. I study the culture, as much as I possibly can. Yeah. I mean, just to see certain types of artists that are coming out, like Chance the Rapper, and then some of the things that Kendrick Lamar was doing, and J. Cole. Really powerful stuff that we hadn't heard in a long time. I feel that we're in the midst of just speaking from my culture, a black art movement right now. I'm seeing that, definitely. Even with Black Panther, all part of that in a lot of great movies and photograph.

I can just go up down the line, which is really exciting to be a part of. I always was saying to myself, I hope to be a part of a movement like that, that I could be in that number, with everything else that's going on.

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FT: The film is Hal King, Hal King the movie. Before we go, Steve, I'd love for you to share with the audience some advice around how to financially survive as an artist. I think a lot of people who are super talented don't pursue the arts, or they do and then they give up, because it's a struggle financially and can be. How have you supported yourself and your family in an industry that's not – it's like, there's a struggle and then you can make it really big. In the middle, it's really hard to be a working actor for years and years and years. Or is it? Maybe that's just the way it's been characterized. Tell us about your experience and any advice you have for budding artists?

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SW: Yeah. I had a mentor some years back that was a music producer and a DJ. He gave me the book *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* once. I read through it, and I had no money, you know what I mean? I was living check-to-check. I took that, but I took that, because a lot of the crux of that

whole book talks about assets and liabilities, and that your assets need to be greater than your liabilities. It's really simple thing. Assets make you money, liabilities, basically waste your money, or something like that.

The idea with me not having any what I thought – I was like, “Well, I don't have any assets.” I'm in a studio apartment. I'm trying to pay my rent each month as low-income housing. What is this? How does this refer to me? What I did realize was that all of my talents are assets. All of them. I really thought about all the talents that I've been given, and I've developed. I draw, I sing, I play instruments.

Other things that are directly adjacent to the things that I do, I also can do. Because I could play instruments, I started developing myself as a music producer, as an arranger. I was doing some of that stuff before too. Then that led me to music engineering, and so not just recording vocals, then mixing vocals. Then not just mixing vocals, but also mastering a song. That just expanded from drawing. I was doing designs for people. I was doing logo art. I was doing cover designs, these types of things.

Then as a singer and being a singer on stage as an opera singer, well, when I go into straight acting, of course, teaching lessons and these types of things, realizing there are certain places that always need music as a practical resource. TV, churches, or places of worship to add your services to mankind in that way. What I've found that's worked for me is to have all of those assets spinning. Some are spending more than others and some are not spending at all, but maybe they will next year right. That's how it worked for me.

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FT: Diversification.

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SW: Yes. Yes.

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FT: It has many meanings. In your career, also so important. Halkingthe movie.com. I'm going to watch. The world premiere was on February 9th. It'll be airing for three months. It's streaming on, you tell us. YouTube. Amazon.

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SW: Yes. iTunes. A ton of different cable service providers, such as Comcast and Spectrum, Dish Network. It's on Google Play. It's in a lot of different places. The most common ones are the Amazon, YouTube and iTunes. If you go to halkingthemovie.com, you can stay in contact with us and we give you all the information you need there.

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FT: Wonderful. Steve Wallace, congratulations.

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SW: Thank you. Thank you for having me, Farnoosh.

[END]