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‘It’s A Lot’: How D.C. Creatives Are Mastering The Art Of Motherhood

Elliot C. Williams Dee Dwyer

In their D.C. apartment, Tsedaye Makonnen assists her son Senai, 10, with his schoolwork after virtual classes.

Dee Dwyer / DCist/WAMU

The word *artist* doesn’t sit well with Kailasa Aqeel, lead vocalist of the D.C. funk band Black Folks Don’t Swim? (yes, it’s meant to be a question). For the Duke Ellington School of the Arts grad, lifelong creator, and mother of an energetic 10-year-old daughter, artist feels more like a working title.

“I feel like the word ‘artist’ has kind of been played out for a while,” Aqeel says between long pauses, gathering her thoughts during a Zoom interview in late March. “Obviously, it still holds true, it still holds value. But like everything, I contain multitudes, and [artist] just doesn’t describe everything.”

Between bowls of Frosted Flakes, early-morning online check-ins for school, PB&J lunches, and *Fortnite* sessions before bed, these mothers have found ways to become teachers, sustainers, motivators, magicians, and — especially — healers. They’ve used their creative outlets for internal and external healing from past relationships, soul-sucking jobs they’ve left behind in search of more colorful pastures, and the eternal shock of the ongoing global health crisis. Most of them are managing it all relatively on their own. Child care duties fell disproportionately on women even in pre-pandemic times, and since COVID-19 set in — as school, work, and playtime all moved home — pressure has mounted on working mothers.

But each one we spoke to is proud of their kids (at least, most days) and of who they themselves have become around their kids. Each one is an artist, but as their daily lives reveal, they are much, much more.

Kailasa Aqeel, musician
Tsedaye Makonnen, performance artist
Keyonna Jones, visual artist and stylist
Deb Almond, visual artist
Ameshia Stukes, artist, teacher, and jewelry maker

In Washington, D.C., Kailasa Aqeel, lead vocalist of Black Folks Don’t Swim?, logs onto a virtual recording session while enjoying a cup of tea in her living room.

Dee Dwyer / DCist/WAMU

Kailasa Aqeel, musician, 29

Among the overused words of these pandemic times is *pivot*. But that’s exactly what 29-year-old singer Kailasa Aqeel did in the midst of writing and recording an album with her experimental funk band, Black Folks Don’t Swim?

On an average day, she wakes to get her 10-year-old daughter, Saa, online for school; or, most recently, to a socially-distanced cheer competition. Then it’s back to the music. Aqeel and her bandmates mix and record remotely now, connecting over Zoom and audio software that allows multiple users to tune in at once. Virtual recording and mixing sessions — hardly considered before 2020 — are now commonplace. (Just do a quick Google search and you’ll find plenty of how-to articles on making music remotely.)

“There’s nothing like that in person experience, of course, but we’re creative, so we have to keep creating,” she says. And create they have: New videos fill up the band’s social media pages, and their debut album, *For the Source Part 1*, is coming this summer.

Aqeel’s laid-back demeanor, low-cut hair, and soulful voice (heard even as she describes her houseplants during a recent video call) matches her groovy vibes on stage. She says not being able to do her usual spacey, Afro-futuristic live performances has sucked, but being grounded has given her more time and space to focus on herself and Saa.

“She’s a blessing, she really is,” Aqeel says of her daughter. “Her gifts? Just lighting up the room, she’s always dancing … *always* dancing. She’s excited about learning what her body can do as an athlete. She has this mindset of, you can actually do anything, and I want to nurture that in her.”

Kailasa says her name is a reference to Mount Kailash, a holy pilgrimage site in some Hindu and Buddhist traditions. The Himalayan peak has inspired her to search for the end of her own spiritual journey, but as she’s grown as a musician and mother, she’s learned something valuable:

“I know that there is no end to a journey,” she says. “Yeah, we’re all on this journey. We’re all on it.”

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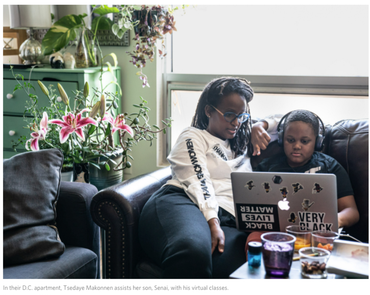

In their D.C. apartment, Tsedaye Makonnen assists her son, Senai, with his virtual classes.

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Tsedaye Makonnen, performance artist, 36

It’s a Friday night at the Eaton Hotel in downtown D.C., and Tsedaye Makonnen is arriving with her 10-year-old son, Senai. They head past the lobby and up to a quiet, spacious room on an upper floor, where her latest work spreads across the floor — a massive tapestry, the fourth installment of her lauded *Astral Sea* series.

Senai heads to a table in the vast, lounge-like coworking space next door. He turns to a page in his notebook to sketch *Naruto* characters while watching the popular anime show on his laptop, his imagination running wild.

Makonnen gets to work carefully placing mirror acrylic shards on the cloth. The pieces are laser-cut from another project of hers — light sculptures that memorialize women who’ve died while migrating from East Africa across the Mediterranean and Black women who have died at the hands of police brutality in the U.S. She plans to bring the piece to life in videos and live performances — as she’s done with the previous three installments — by wearing the fabric and moving unpredictably so the shards crash and fall off, embodying the violence Black women have endured over time. Makonnen, a 36-year-old raised in Silver Spring, draws upon her Ethiopian heritage, cosmology, and her experiences as a Black mother to create this unfiltered performance art.

“Anybody who performs, whether it’s a musician, singer, or performance artist, you are embodying something else,” she says. “You can turn into a conduit, essentially. So in these performances, I feel like I’m embodying the women that this work is about.”

At the Eaton, while arranging the mirror pieces, Makonnen stresses over a deadline (a gallery she signed with displays her work at art conventions in far-reaching places like Dubai). But she’s used to being on a tight schedule. For about four years, she worked as a doula with Mamatoto Village, a D.C.-based nonprofit that provides perinatal care, while also raising her son and expanding her portfolio. Every minute was precious then.

“I describe that time like I was possessed, because I would come off of a 40-hour birth at GW Hospital, and then I’d have to go to a show in New York that I was performing for. I’d literally get off the birth, situate my son with my parents or my brother, and then drive up 95,” Makonnen recalls. “I don’t know what I was running off of, but it wasn’t natural. But I’m glad I did it.”

Her days are now spent getting Senai online for virtual fourth grade from 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., taking work-related calls throughout the day, and heading to a local park to play soccer. She now has to be his mom, tutor, lunch lady, and motivator, all at once.

“It’s a lot,” Makonnen says. “In those moments where I’m not able to really keep track of what he’s doing, that’s usually when he’ll start going on YouTube and looking at *Naruto* episodes, or going on Netflix instead of being in class. And that usually bites us in the ass … When it’s time to do assignments after class, I’m having to walk him through it more because he checked out of class. Overall, he’s a great student. It’s just, this is not the best way for most children to learn now.”

Reflecting on her latest efforts as a full-time artist — her pieces that feature in galleries in London and Addis Ababa, and a book she has in the works with the Washington Project for the Arts — she takes a deep breath, almost in disbelief that she’s come this far. Makonnen says she couldn’t manage without her friends who feature her work in their music videos, lend her studio space, or keep an eye on Senai while she works.

“I rely a lot on my community,” she says. “They say, ‘Don’t mix friendships and business.’ But there are some friends of mine who … that’s just what we do.”