

“Neuroscience as Performance Art” with Baba Brinkman

Transcript of Communicating Brain Science Podcast



Guest: Baba Brinkman is the creative force and star of a one-man show that talks about integrating hip-hop, humor, and brain research into 70 minutes of entertainment.

Host: Bill Glovin serves as editor of *Cerebrum* and the *Cerebrum Anthology: Emerging Issues in Brain Science*. He is also executive editor of the Dana Press and *Brain in the News*. Prior to joining the Dana Foundation, Mr. Glovin was senior editor of *Rutgers Magazine* and editor of *Rutgers Focus*. He has served as managing editor of *New Jersey Success*, editor of *New Jersey Business* magazine, and as a staff writer at *The Record* newspaper in Hackensack, NJ. Mr. Glovin has won 20 writing awards from the Society of Professional Journalists of New Jersey and the Council for Advancement and Support of Education. He has a B.A. in Journalism from George Washington University.

Intro: Imagine being a brain. You're locked inside a boney skull trying to figure what's out there in the world.

There's no light inside the skull, there's no sound either. All you've got to go on are streams of electrical impulses which are only indirectly related to things in the world, whatever they may be.

[Music]

Bill Glovin: What you just heard was a number called Wizard of Odds. One of the numbers from *Rap Guide to Consciousness*, a new play by Baba Brinkman that just got extended at the Soho Playhouse through mid-May.

Hi, I'm Cerebrum editor Bill Glovin and welcome to a Dana Foundation podcast, which is a little different than my usual Cerebrum podcast in which I talk to neuroscientists about their cerebrum articles.

Baba Brinkman is not a neuroscientist, but his play is all about the brain, and this seemed like too good of a chance to pass up in terms of getting people interested in such complex topics as free will, artificial intelligence, the presence or absence of thoughts in infants and animals among other things.

When my colleague Ann Whitman asked me if I had any interest in attending a new play called *The Rap Guide to Consciousness*, I've got to admit I was skeptical. For one thing, I'm old school and have never really taken to rap. Mostly I find it lacks melody and I rarely understand 90 percent of the lyrics as it

comes at my brain way too quickly. As much praise as *Hamilton* has received, I've heard from a lot of people who have seen it that it took them a while to get their brains to adjust at the speed of all the lyrics coming at them. Once they adjusted they were fine. I think I'd definitely be one of those people.

Another reason I was skeptical was the idea that someone could explain the difficult concept of consciousness as performance art. *Cerebrum* recently published an article on consciousness titled *Know Thy Self – Well-being and the Subjective Experience*. I initially invited Joe LeDoux, the founder and director of the Emotional Institute at NYU, to write the article. The subject is so complex that Joe in turn invited three of his colleagues to co-write the article with him. Awareness of one's self is one of the most difficult subjects to explain in brain research.

But I've got to say the creator and force behind the *Rap Guide to Consciousness*, Baba Brinkman, does a masterful job of explaining the dilemma that is consciousness. In writing for our blog, I got Brinkman on the phone, and thought you would enjoy hearing directly from him.

We talk about where he got the idea for the play, his approach to the difficult subject matter and how his wife, Heather Berlin, a neuroscientist at the Mount Sinai Medical School, fit in to the play's origins.

One more thing. Brinkman was on a treadmill at his gym using Bluetooth during the conversation. Who says you can't walk and chew gum at the same time?

First, thanks so much Baba for taking time to talk. Let me congratulate you on a masterful piece of work. Two things were particularly amazing. One, I understood every word. Your diction was clear as a bell. And second, it seemed that you didn't mess up even once, or at least I didn't detect you messing up.

Let's begin with, since your play is so out of the box, let me ask you an out of the box question. How did a bald rapper hook up with a Harvard and Oxford trained neuroscientist wife? And let me add that I'm balder than you.

- Baba Brinkman: That was about six years ago and I certainly had more hair, but not that much more.
- Bill Glovin: It must have been the force of your personality then.
- Baba Brinkman: That's exactly right. She could overlook the flaws and get to the heart of things.
- Bill Glovin: Good, good.
- Baba Brinkman: Or the brain of things.
- Bill Glovin: So how did you guys meet?

Baba Brinkman: Well there's this event that happens fairly regularly in the Lower East Side called Lucid. Lucid NYC.

Bill Glovin: Uh-huh (affirmative).

Baba Brinkman: And if you go to the Lucid website or YouTube page you can actually see the original night which was ... It was September the 5th 2012. And we both on the bill, so I had never met her but I saw her give her lecture and then she saw me do my rap, so we were like mutual fans before we met and then after, I very enthusiastically approached her and said I really loved your talk, are you single, can I take you for drink?

Bill Glovin: Nice.

Baba Brinkman: No beating around the bush, just went for it and she happened to be and she said sure here's my number. So that's how it started.

Bill Glovin: Cool. Can you explain to me a little about your training in the theater? You know obviously ... I checked out your website. It's unbelievable. I mean I could spend three days on your website, there's so much material on there and there's so much interesting stuff and you know, the website itself is a great accomplishment I gotta say.

But anyway, there's not that much about you personally there. Maybe there is but it's buried. So tell me about, you know, your origins in the theater?

Baba Brinkman: I don't really have any formal theater training. I was an aspiring rap artist in my teens. I did a master's degree in comparative literature. I was training myself to rap the whole time. I can probably say I'm the only person that got a masters in comparative literature in order to be a more erudite rapper, which was my plan from the beginning. But you know theater wasn't really part of my preview, I just wanted to do rap that broke grounds in terms of tackling the most complicated, most important topics and sort of public conversations.

It was almost like a logistical thing. If you write a scientifically complicated rap and do it at a nightclub, you don't have the attention span you need, so at a certain point I was like what do I do with these things that I'm writing that I just think of as rap you know taken to the next level in terms of intellectual density and some people said why don't you try a fringe festival. And these are these sort of open entry theater festivals. The biggest one is in Edinburgh.

So that's what I did. The year after I graduated, I took my rap version of *The Canterbury Tales* to the biggest arts festival there in Scotland and it just got a fabulous response. I got rave reviews and I sold out my whole run, and there's something about black box theater space that you really have the audience. You have them for an hour, an hour and a half and you take them through a sequence of ideas...

So I kind of came in to theater just like what do I do with this stuff that I'm writing and want to connect with people and it's really just doing shows for the last 15 years or so. Probably like an average of 50 to 100 shows a year. Just trying things out and seeing what works and collaborating with directors and visual designers and lighting designers and learning the stagecraft of how to put a show together. That's what got me in to theater but I never studied theater. I studied literature and my artistic passion which is rap, from the recording and performing perspective.

Bill Glovin: How old are you and how did you gravitate to rap from western Canada? And who are your role models in music?

Baba Brinkman: So I'm 39 and I started paying attention to rap when I was 10 or 11. So elementary school and just you know, as soon as I was old enough to buy my own tapes I was buying rap tapes. And at the beginning it was Run DMC and Eric B and Rakim and the Beastie Boys and Slick Rick. And, yeah I just liked the story telling aspect of a lot, you know you listen to a rap song and it's like you've just been taken in to this world that you would otherwise have no encounter with. And they're painting pictures with words.

I was in to poetry when I was young too. I think when I was 10 I memorized this like eight-minute long Canadian folk poem called *The Cremation of Sam McGee*. I just loved the idea of the raconteur story tellers/poets, so you know that was my interest in rap, as a lyrical story telling form. And then at a certain point I started seeing ways that I could mix the forms.

But you know the odd thing for me looking back is this lag where I start listening to rap and loving it at 10 or 11, but I didn't write any of my own until 18 or 19. So the journey in those intermediate years, I guess I'm like an observer and an appreciator of the culture but I wasn't really sure how I could possibly fit in considering how different my background was and my sensibilities were from most rappers.

And it was only when I sort of made this connection, okay so if Chaucer or Shakespeare were born into this age, what form would be the best outlet for their talents and passions? Rap. Contemporary poetry is nothing like what poetry was like 600 years ago in the English language. But rap is far more similar to it. So I ended up writing my master's thesis comparing medieval competitive poetry with rap competitive poetry. And that gave me a way to conceptualize myself as a branch in the tree of hip hop culture. Taking it in to a new place which is, you know, poetry and literature and then from there I got in to science.

Bill Glovin: Yeah. Well you know I couldn't help but think about, you know Lin-Manuel Miranda and *Hamilton* and how they've used rap in, or how he used rap to communicate that story so effectively.

- Baba Brinkman: Yes.
- Bill Glovin: I don't know if you've seen that or not or-
- Baba Brinkman: Yes I haven't seen it. I can't bring myself to bite the bullet and spend 500 dollars on a ticket for a month from now and can't seem to plan my life far enough ahead to buy a ticket for 6 months from now when they are actually affordable, so I haven't seen it but I've listened to the soundtrack a few times and you know Lin-Manuel Miranda and I have been in a way kind of like on parallel paths. We actually met at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2005. I was there with my *Canterbury Tales* show and he was there with a show called *Freestyle Love Supreme*, where he and some friends were doing sort of improvised musical jams where the audience would give them topics and it was all freestyle, it was a great, great show. But I remember meeting him there and we were both sort of on the street handing out flyers for our unusual hip hop theater hybrids and he sure came through with the masterpiece of *Hamilton* but we've been on parallel paths in a way.
- Bill Glovin: Cool. Now your parents, what did they do? Were they artists?
- Baba Brinkman: No my parents founded a company in the early 70's that is now the largest reforestation company in Canada. So tree planting was the family business that I grew up around. That company has recently celebrated the planting of 1.25 billion trees in Canada.
- Bill Glovin: Wow.
- Baba Brinkman: In the last 40 years. So that's what I used to do, I paid my way through college planting trees every summer. And then just segued from that in to rap in around 2004 and haven't really done it for a living since.
- Bill Glovin: Now I know you explained the origins of your name in the ... you know before the play, or during the play, but just for clarification, so your father named you Baba because he was, or your parents did because they were spiritually connected to the Dalai Lama?
- Baba Brinkman: No but the Dalai Lama is an example of what's seen as an enlightened person, who in the tradition of, to that Buddhism gets reincarnated. So the consciousness of the Dalai Lama that is born into a child and they vet these children to see which one is the new Dalai Lama and then they're raised from birth or from whatever age, four. So you know that idea about consciousness can be reincarnated was the inspiration for Baba because my parents weren't Tibetan Buddhists but I think they were more in to the Sufi or Hindu mystical tradition, but those gurus are called Babas, right like Sai Baba and Meher Baba, Baba Ramdav, you know the kind of spiritual gurus, like the one that the Beatles were studying with in the 60s and stuff.

And apparently when I was born I had very contemplative look on my face, and my Dad was like he's a Baba, he must be a Baba. So he called me Baba as a sort of sign of my old soul or something like that. As I became more scientifically and skeptically minded, my name took on bit of an ironic twist but I still keep it, I've had it since birth.

Bill Glovin: Were you teased a lot as a kid?

Baba Brinkman: No, not really actually. Most of the kids that I grew up with knew me since I was very young and so Baba was not odd to them. But I should say that when it came for my first day of school, elementary school, I still remember my Mom was like do you want them to call you Baba or... and you know my Dad called me Baba but didn't quite have the guts to write it on my birth certificate so, my legal name is Dirk which is actually also my father's name.

Baba Brinkman: And so I was Dirk in school, I chose to be called Dirk in school probably precisely for what you just suggested. That the idea of going through all public school with the name Baba was a little too much to bear. So I was like Baba at home and Dirk at school and then when I graduated from high school, when I went to college, I was like I don't have to play those games any more, and I used Baba starting from my first day of college and ever since.

Bill Glovin: Wow, that's quite interesting. How long did it take you to create the show?

Baba Brinkman: The first words of the script of *Rap Guide to Consciousness* were written less than a year ago. I think I first started scripting it in April of last year and it premiered at some comedy festival last summer. Brighton and Edinburgh and Winnipeg.

Baba Brinkman: So, you know the writing process, I mean it took me about six weeks to get from putting the first words on paper to having a version I was performing at these festivals. That was like a 55-minute version and then I, over the past year, expanded it with about 20 or 25 minutes of new material and sort of favors, adding bits to it.

The research, probably like six months before that of reading.

Bill Glovin: And does somebody vet what you're saying or how do you know if what you are saying is accurate? I mean I know you have your wife as a resource, but she's probably busy.

Baba Brinkman: Yeah, she was not the ... she wasn't the prime ... she wasn't the main scientific consultant. She was, you know, part of the process for sure, definitely ran ideas by her but the main thing is that she introduced me to one of her colleagues, whose name is Anil Seth. And it was his lab that produced that dog video I showed with the predictive processing analysis. He's at the University of Sussex in the UK

So we met at a conference in 2016, it was a consciousness conference that I was performing at, but I hadn't written anything for it I just ... the video is actually on YouTube if you want, I could send you a link to it. But it's basically like, they brought me to this conference in Arizona with all these neuroscience lectures on consciousness, and the brain, you've probably heard of this thing right the Tucson Consciousness Conference, Stuart Hameroff organized it.

So they brought me in to sort of write daily rap summaries of all the talks, and I met one of Heather's colleagues there, Dr. Seth, and he said I love what you're doing. What would it take to put together a *Rap Guide to Consciousness*? And he had some funding from the welcome trust and he helped to support the project and it was ... we had a meeting a year and a half ago to talk through like what would the *Rap Guide to Consciousness* look like, what kind of ideas would it tackle, which theories of consciousness should and shouldn't be included.

Baba Brinkman: So, I'm consulting with Heather, with Anil, right from the beginning and then I'm sending drafts of the script to Anil and getting commentary and he suggests you might want to read this if you're going to go in that direction. So the whole process was collaborative.

And then by the end, when you know I premiered the show at the Brighton Fringe in England, he's bringing his whole neuroscience lab to the opening night and you know the Q&A is very well informed and you know, I kind of know that I need to be up there representing an accurate view of the current state of the science for it to get any traction among the research community, which is what helps promote it to a wider [inaudible 00:18:57] audience as well.

Bill Glovin: Are there any plans to produce a video version of the show?

Baba Brinkman: I would love to do it as like a Netflix special, or HBO special or something. You know there's not immediate plans for that. It's kind of, you know these things have to build support from the bottom up so, you know we're just trying to fill up the house every day and get a good buzz going for the show and I have a publicist that's reaching out to, you know to networks and to media and trying to get people to come see it.

I had someone from Audible come recently and say maybe we could talk about producing it as an audio play, but I think the visuals are pretty key for this one as well so...

Yeah, no immediate plans but I hope that's where it goes.

Bill Glovin: I can't tell you how much I enjoyed it. My daughter who's in theater really, we thought the world of it. I was skeptical, I gotta admit, going in but you've turned me into a believer for sure.

Baba Brinkman: That's not an unusual transition, I think that's basically the waters that I swim in, right? I consider myself an extremophile. I thrive in hostile environments.

Baba Brinkman: Because people come to the show generally with no expectations or low expectation and that gives me the fun of being able to break them down over the course of my performance.

Bill Glovin: Yeah and I've got to be honest, I'm not a big fan of rap. I'm a guy in my 60s and I grew up on classic rock, I'm a classic rock fan and all of that but I could understand every single word, which I thought was just amazing because that's usually part of the problem. *Hamilton* also does a great job of that but a lot of times I guess my brain doesn't process rap properly because I'm, I don't know if I'm old or what the problem is there but I generally don't understand a lot of it which is a frustrating part of it for me.

Bill Glovin: But with you I, you know I could just, the clarity was amazing and that was a real key to the ability to enjoy it.

Baba Brinkman: Have you listened to Kendrick Lamar very much?

Bill Glovin: I have, I have the butterfly, *Pimp the Butterfly* CD, you know, and I do like parts of that, that is good.

Baba Brinkman: Yeah. I mean he does a good job of making art out of rap if you know what I mean. He really turns it in to a literary form and you know works with so much jazz production and everything. You know he's, I think he's a visionary when it comes to like, not being stuck in the strict boundaries of the medium he's working in.

Bill Glovin: Yeah.

Baba Brinkman: So. But not all contemporary rap is as intelligible. You gotta trust your audience wants to hear the words and follow them if you give them to them clearly.

Bill Glovin: Yeah. Great. Okay Baba I'll let you go. Thanks again man.

Baba Brinkman: All right, thank you. Bill.

Bill Glovin: Bye Bye.

Baba Brinkman: Yeah.

Bill Glovin: And that's my conversation with Baba Brinkman. Creator and star of a *Rap Guide to Consciousness*.

I guarantee you will enjoy this show. I should also mention that the show is directed by Darren Lee Cole with production design by Olivia Sebesky.

Let's conclude with another sample from the show the opening number called *Heaven's Gate*.

Baba Brinkman: (Singing)