**Sarah Rachel Brown:** Hi, my name is Sarah Rachel Brown. I'm a 30-something-year-old woman and I live in Philadelphia. I'm a contemporary jeweler. Like many others, I am an artist trying to make a living.

[music]

On this podcast, I'm going to broach the subject of value. I'll be talking to studio artists and performers, educators and administrators, and anyone else attempting to combine their creative endeavors with how they get a paycheck. It's fall here in Florida, the sweltering heat has subsided, and it's cool enough to turn off my AC in the mornings and enjoy my coffee, if the window is open.

This small town I'm in is definitely centered around tourism, so things have quieted, but what I'm finding is that there's so much more to do now. For example, last weekend, the local brew pub put on a little Oktoberfest, which felt like a Philadelphia block party. Next weekend is Porchfest, where live music can be enjoyed all over town, and you guessed it, locals host bands on their porches.

Everybody gets in their golf carts and drives around to see all the bands. It's going to be awesome. Then after that is this Florida Seafood Fest held right here, which brings tens of thousands of people to this little town. I've been told it's like a country fair but with seafood. I'm loving fall in Florida. I've got a little over two months left of this adventure I'm on, aka remote consulting job, and I haven't figured out my next gig.

I had hoped something would have been confirmed by now but I'm not yet in complete panic mode. I've been diligent about my savings, so I have a small cushion to help me transition back to Philadelphia. I'll figure something out. This freelancer remains optimistic. I gained eight new patrons on my Patreon since my last episode. That's incredible. Thank you to Heather, Brian, Namita, and Nicole, Sarah, **[unintelligible 00:02:21]** Bespoke, Frida, and Jeruska.

Supporting the podcast through my Patreon is the best way to show your appreciation for this work I'm doing. Sign up to be my patron at patreon.com/perceivedvalue for as little as a dollar a month. Other ways you can support the podcast is by subscribing to the podcast on iTunes. Then once you have subscribed, rating and reviewing. It's free to do and helps others find the podcast. Find me, your host on social media @sarahrachelbrown, and find the podcast at *Perceived Value*.

My guest today is someone I met a few years ago in New York City, before the pandemic, before everything changed, and we were introduced by our mutual friend, Tom. Now, Tom, everybody loves Tom. He's a musician from Atlanta, and he is most definitely a connector. The author, Malcolm Gladwell, introduced me to this idea in his book, *Tipping Point*, it's this that people fall roughly into three categories, connectors, mavens, salesmen.

Connectors are the sociable, gregarious types that are naturally skilled at making friends and acquaintances. Like their title, they're good at introductions. I also think of myself as a connector, a people specialist of sorts, and my knack is for nurturing those connections. I keep in touch and so, of course, when I was planning out my road trip from Philadelphia to Florida, I planned a night in Atlanta to say hello to my good friend, Tom, and our friend, Ken, who had since moved back to Atlanta from New York City.

Ken Oriole is a Grammy-winning recording engineer who has teamed up with many of the top artists and producers in the industry and has worked at some of the world's most renowned studios. He is known for his vast technical expertise, musical comprehension, and almost two decades of experience working across multiple genres in a variety of roles. Naturally, I reached out to Ken to help me troubleshoot some audio issues I was having. He also agreed to an interview.

[music]

Ken, you're great. Thanks for the help and I hope you approve of the sound quality of this episode. Please welcome, today's guest, Ken Oriole.

**Sarah:** Fun fact. Do you know John Rzeznik, Hot Snakes, Rocket from the Crypt, Drive Like Jehu, Swami Records, kind of stuff? His new band is called PLOSIVS. [laughs] I had a moment where I was like, "Oh, I know what that means" because I was watching all these things about plosives, which is like [pop sounds] those are plosives, guys. Ew. Wow, these things are actually doing a lot.

**Ken Oriole:** That's what it's for.

**Sarah:** Well, it's called the pot filter for a reason. Pop, pop, pop. Oh, ew. Wow. I went and saw his new band and it's one of the guys from Pinback, it was rad, they're great.

**Ken:** Nice.

**Sarah:** I was just having a moment in my head where I was like, "Felt cool" because I feel like an alien in the production world. I was like, "I know what plosives mean." [chuckles]

**Ken:** Yes, they make a huge difference.

**Sarah:** What do you think of my microphones though?

**Ken:** They're good.

**Sarah:** Yes? Do you think this was a good choice?

**Ken:** Yes.

**Sarah:** Everyone listening, we have spent a good hour plus doing sound check quality kind of things, learned a lot of things from Ken just now. Thanks for the whole like, "This is where you actually plug in your headphones into your interface." Wow. Hey, my pride's not hurt, I'm a jeweler. Do you know anything about how to make jewelry?

**Ken:** Nothing.

**Sarah:** Great. I'm going to hold that over your head a lot as we have this discussion. Also, found out, I've been having a lot of issues with my sound bleeding into my mic, and that's because the headphones I have put out sound.

**Ken:** They're open back.

**Sarah:** Holy shit. Wow. That's not a good thing for what I'm doing.

**Ken:** Yes. You want closed-back headphones.

**Sarah:** Right. I'm buying a new set of headphones. Then what am I going to do with these?

**Ken:** I don't know.

**Sarah:** Oh, what would you do with these? What are they good for?

**Ken:** They're good for mixing, so when you're not recording and you're listening to your mixes.

**Sarah:** Oh, okay. Because I do mix every episode so, maybe I'll use closed-back when I'm recording, then I use these for mixing.

**Ken:** Yes.

**Sarah:** I think I'm getting in over my head, but like, "Hey, I'm in for the ride." Hi, Ken.

**Ken:** Hi.

**Sarah:** Hey, it's nice to be in Atlanta with you.

**Ken:** It's fun to have you here.

**Sarah:** Yes? I'm excited. I got here at like what, two o'clock? Guys, it's 5:17 right now. We went to the bar, had a few drinks, and then we started working, which I appreciate that approach. That was great.

[laughter]

**Sarah:** Ken, can you say your full name for everyone that's listening?

**Ken:** Ken Oriole.

**Sarah:** First of all, can you give your pronouns and how old you are?

**Ken:** I am, I guess pretty much 38 now.

**Sarah:** Rounding up.

**Ken:** Yes. It's two days away.

**Sarah:** [chuckles]

**Ken:** I don't really care on the pronouns. You can call me whatever.

**Sarah:** We can call you whatever?

**Ken:** Yes.

**Sarah:** Okay, I like that. I guess it's a good thing to just mention. We're in Atlanta right now. Are you from Atlanta, Ken?

**Ken:** I moved here straight from college, so adult life from-- I started my career here.

**Sarah:** You started your career here?

**Ken:** Yes.

**Sarah:** Real quick, give a description of what your job is.

**Ken:** I record music.

**Sarah:** I would call you a producer. Is that what you like to be called?

**Ken:** It depends on a project because sometimes I'm just a recording engineer and there's another producer role. Other times, you're both. The lines really blur in producer and engineer, so it's like, I don't know, there's a lot of crossing paths there.

**Sarah:** In my phone, you're saved as Kengineer.

**Ken:** Nice.

**Sarah:** [chuckles] Isn't that your social media handle? Where did I get that?

**Ken:** Yes. I use it on my Instagram posts. I do the hashtag Kengineer on all my posts. I got that from this band I was working with years ago, and they're a lot younger than me. They were giving me a lot of flack about how bad I am on social media. Then they came up with Kengineer.

**Sarah:** Oh, okay. Oh, well, good for them. Way to push it for that.

**Ken:** They're like "How do you not even have a Twitter?" I was like, "I don't know because I don't know."

**Sarah:** I don't have a Twitter.

**Ken:** They're like, "You need a Twitter, a Snapchat." I was like, "I have Instagram."

**Sarah:** Well, Ken, I mean no shade to that band, but are you making a living at what you do?

**Ken:** I am.

**Sarah:** Well then, I think you're doing just fine with your marketing tactics. Let's start with some basics. You went to college near Atlanta, if I make that assumption?

**Ken:** No, I went to college in Orlando, I went to the Full Sail.

**Sarah:** Oh, you did?

**Ken:** I did.

**Sarah:** Oh, that's so funny. Wait, where did you grow up, Ken?

**Ken:** Originally in South Korea.

**Sarah:** Okay.

**Ken:** Moved to the States when I was 10. Lived in a small town in South Georgia.

**Sarah:** That's interesting. Around the age of 10 is when I moved. That's funny because I really strongly identify where I lived up until when I was 10. Do you go back to Korea a lot? Do you have a lot of friends there or anything still?

**Ken:** I have whole half side of my family there. I won't say I have any friends there anymore. More just family. I try to go back every now and then, but I'm due for a trip. It's been a little while.

**Sarah:** You're due for a trip? Where in Korea?

**Ken:** Busan.

**Sarah:** Busan. I've never been to Korea or anywhere near.

**Ken:** It's like Seoul's capital and then Busan is the next big city.

**Sarah:** Oh, okay. It seems like a fairly large city.

**Ken:** Yes, definitely.

**Sarah:** How is that moving to a small town in Georgia?

**Ken:** It was weird.

**Sarah:** Yes, that sounds weird. Why did your family relocate?

**Ken:** My dad's job.

**Sarah:** Oh, your dad's job. Oh, guys, I love this as the sound engineer hearing his ice cubes be made in his fridge and he's having a moment. Don't mess up my sound quality, Ken. Geez. Well, so your dad's job brought you guys to a small town, Georgia.

**Ken:** Yes.

**Sarah:** Was that fun?

**Ken:** I hated it in certain ways, but it did shape me in a lot of ways too. I don't think I would be doing what I'm doing now without it.

**Sarah:** Oh, okay.

**Ken:** I was always in major cities. My dad's family's from New York, so whenever we visited the states it's New York City. Busan's a very congested city like that. There's always something to do even as a kid, you can get around the town by yourself and do stuff, but then I get to Albany and there's nothing to do. I made friends and then we got really into music and started playing music because there's nothing else to do. I don't think I would've gotten to music at the same level I did without being there.

**Sarah:** Yes. Boredom leads to productivity in some ways.

**Ken:** Yes.

**Sarah:** Okay. I have a close friend in high school in Iowa that went to Full Sail and I remember being like, "Oh my God, Tim Cypress smell, you're so cool. You're going to go like be a sound engineer." He went and never really did much. In fact, went into the military pretty much right after. Can you describe to listeners what Full Sail is?

**Ken:** Well, I guess it's an entertainment school. They have film, audio, video game design programs. I went for audio and there's so many audio schools now and it's all the same thing. It's just going to college for audio instead of-

**Sarah:** Academics.

**Ken:** Yes.

**Sarah:** Would you describe it? In my perception of it, I thought it was more of like a technical college, like a very specific thing.

**Ken:** Yes, it is. It's more like going to a tech college I guess. I don't know how much I agree with going to school for direction, like a creative industry or direction like that.

**Sarah:** Ooh, you can say that all day on this podcast because I'm right there with you in many ways.

**Ken:** Yes, me going was a compromise between me and my mom because I dropped out of college and went on tour with my band, and then I wanted to do audio and the compromise was to get a degree in it so I went to Full Sail.

**Sarah:** Got to make mom happy.

**Ken:** Yes.

**Sarah:** Did mom pay for college though?

**Ken:** Nope. I had to pay for all of it.

**Sarah:** Oh, that's not a fun compromise. You pleased your mother. How expensive was Full Sail or was it?

**Ken:** It was a lot cheaper back then. It was still really just two buildings when I went. Now it's like a whole campus and I was fortunate. I was able to have half of my tuition paid, poor me. I was able to get rid of my student debts without too much trouble.

**Sarah:** Oh, that's good. How long was the program?

**Ken:** 12 months.

**Sarah:** 12 months. Oh. That's nice.

**Ken:** Yes.

**Sarah:** I think if I would've went to a program that was only meant to be 12 months, I think I would've finally finished one. Okay, so you graduated. What was technically your degree or certificate? Was it a degree or certificate?

**Ken:** It's Associate's Degree in Recording Arts.

**Sarah:** Oh, nice. Did you have a ceremony? Did you walk across the stage? Did mom come?

**Ken:** Yes. My parents came. We did-- I don't even remember wherewe-- I think we did House of Blues in Orlando.

**Sarah:** Really?

**Ken:** Yes.

**Sarah:** Okay. Full Sail. I'm into this so far. Okay, so you graduate, and what was your immediate job afterwards?

**Ken:** Guitar Center.

**Sarah:** Guitar Center. You got to start somewhere, babe. Was it in Orlando?

**Ken:** No, no. In Atlanta.

**Sarah:** Oh, so you moved back.

**Ken:** I moved straight after graduation. It was me and a good friend of mine, he's still here too. He was from Massachusetts and we were discussing. We were like, "Oh well, let's move together. We get along, you know?" We were really on the fence between New York and Atlanta. I think especially Atlanta's cost of living back in 2005 was the decision-maker.

**Sarah:** Yes. Oh, we're so close in age. It's fun to talk to somebody closer in age. I'm like, "Oh, 2005." Yes, I graduated in 2004. Similar time frame there. Okay, so Guitar Center, how was that? I'm assuming you had your band still at this time?

**Ken:** No, I was done with that.

**Sarah:** You were done with that. What'd you play in your band?

**Ken:** I played bass. I don't know, I wasn't done with bands after getting into record. I would record all the demos and then it's just a lot of people to deal with **[unintelligible 00:16:16]** and lazy people and whatnot. I was like, "I think I'd rather just record and then I just want that."

**Sarah:** I love that. I always made this joke. I was in a country band for a long time and it was me and eight men and I was like, "Yes, it's like a dysfunctional non-sexual relationship. Me and eight bitchy men."

**Ken:** It is. I've explained being in a band so many times. I was in a four-piece and I was like, "Dude, that's like being married to four dudes."

**Sarah:** Yes. It really is. All those people are still very much so very close, very much in my life. We'll play shows every once in a while, but not full-time. I also appreciate the fact that through playing live music you found the aspect of it that you really liked and it was behind the scenes.

**Ken:** Yes, and I think it's weird because I think some people take a really long time to find it. It's like I'm actually not a very good musician. I really gravitated towards the recording because I'm definitely more technical-minded and creative-minded. I love creative, so it's like, for me, being an engineer-producer, I get to facilitate the creativities of people that are more creative than me. I enjoy that. I get to make their vision come to life.

**Sarah:** Yes. I like that. I resent this concept of those who cannot teach. I hate that phrase because for me as a jeweler, I like telling the stories behind jewelers or creatives, but I haven't wanted to run my own business. I like telling the stories of those running businesses. I like this role better. I see some similarity between this, Ken.

**Ken:** Nice.

**Sarah:** I'm trying to reach out to you. Okay, Ken. Let's keep going on this career trajectory because you're really good at what you do. How long did you last at Guitar Center?

**Ken:** Two weeks.

**Sarah:** Oh my God. You could have said that immediately. That's not a real job.

**Ken:** It actually got me my job that got me all my connections. I've never walked out on a job other than that in my life.

**Sarah:** Oh, you walked out?

**Ken:** Yes. I didn't get along with management at all. I ended up just throwing my name badge on the table and walking out.

**Sarah:** Listeners, you can't see who Ken is. There will be pictures and links in the description of the podcast. You don't strike me as somebody that like-

**Ken:** I've never done that. I was just so mad. I left and I went to where I was interning at the moment, which was weird because this one's not even a studio or production intern. I was interning with A&R Rap. He worked out of a home office and he had young kids. I get there and his manager that I was working with, she also managed Butch Walker Studio. I took that internship waiting for the internship to open up at Butch Walker Studio. That was the goal.

**Sarah:** Is Butch Walker a famous recording studio?

**Ken:** Big producer.

**Sarah:** Okay.

**Ken:** I took it anyways. I didn't smoke in my internship because I would always try to keep it a certain professional thing, especially he has kids at the house, but I'd stormed out of a Guitar Center that day right before. I was like, "Chrissy, I got to walk down the street to go smoke a cigarette. I'm having a rough day." She was like, "I'll walk with you." I told her and then she was like, "Oh, there's this place called Atlanta Pro Audio. You should go work there. Our dude's leaving for LA." She let me leave internship right away, went there and then they hired me that day.

**Sarah:** What? That's nice.

**Ken:** They're like a boutique, just not walk-in customers. More boutique high-end, like just studio consulting and gear. That's how I met all the producers and artists in Atlanta that I started working with.

**Sarah:** You're going to have to go into that a little deeper because I'm an outsider here. I'm assuming most of my listening base doesn't know a lot of producers and the trajectory of producers' careers. Who at that studio through that, what your job was like renting?

**Ken:** There, it was selling studio gear, so high-end studio gear and then a lot of repairs.

**Sarah:** Oh, okay.

**Ken:** Studios would bring their computers in to fix because they always crash. Then that's how I built a connection with a lot of people.

**Sarah:** Oh cool. Someone would come in, you guys would have a great connection because you would fix their computer. They like your efficiency or how smart you are.

**Ken:** Then I'd start, I'd be like, ''Hey, I engineer also.'' Then they started inviting me to the studio and let me assist on some sessions and then let's build our relationship from there.

**Sarah:** Okay. I love this part of this because I understand the hierarchy in a lot of places, but with production I have no idea. There's a producer, let's say there's a producer in the room, they're the ones manning the board. They're calling the shots, but then they have assistants. What would you do as an assistant producer?

**Ken:** A lot of times in music you have a producer and they're the ones calling the shots musically saying, ''Oh we should do this or that musically. Then there's an engineer and he's the one manning the board and doing what the producer wants.'' Then there's an assistant engineer that's assisting the engineer.

**Sarah:** If you need cables ran to a microphone or a mic switched out or speakers or something.

**Ken:** That would often be the assistant.

**Sarah:** Don't laugh at me, but in terms of ways I can relate this in my head, Timberland is a famous producer. In my mind I think, I thought he was the engineer also. That was one of the same.

**Ken:** He used engineers. One of the famous producers that is an incredible engineer would be Dr. Dre, he did that.

**Sarah:** In terms of podcasting world, it's like, I host and do this podcast but I also am trying to really be a good producer of my episode where some people are just hosts and they pay people to produce it. Dr. Dre produces and engineers. Oh, so he's a really, really amazing artist because of that and you wear both hats. You can be a producer and you be an engineer.

**Ken:** I'm definitely more of an engineer, but I do do some projects where I'm also producing.

**Sarah:** Okay. I'm going to throw this out here because I know who you are and we've had conversations off air a lot. I know some of the bigger names you work with. I'm going to drop a name. André 3000. I know you work with him a lot. Do you work with Andre as a producer or an engineer?

**Ken:** As an engineer. We've built a lot of trust. He definitely self-produces his music. He knows where he's going with it. That's where it's like there's a lot of times engineering and producer is not like, there's not a distinct line sometimes. It's like there is a lot of my input on it too. It's like we're co-producing but he's definitely, it's not like a 50 -50. He's the lead.

**Sarah:** That's been a long working relationship you as his engineer. Now would you say that your role with him is like, you're like his personal engineer? You're somebody that, he's established that relationship and he doesn't really work with a lot of, it seems like an engineer is somebody that once you got used to somebody in the way they work, you wouldn't want to have a bunch of different engineers.

**Ken:** It does help because you build a workflow and then just an understanding. It's like you're just comfortable with the way each other work. It helps your creativity because you're not having to be like, ''Oh I got to do this like this or like this.'' He can just concentrate on it and it's creativity and then it's just gotten to the point where it's like we have conversations with no words at a studio, where it's like we'll be on the same page and it just makes it comfortable as a creator to not have to worry about anything else.

**Sarah:** I think about that with the jeweler, I apprenticed with, I apprenticed under a jeweler for three years and at the end it's like she didn't even have to tell me certain things. That's so nice. It's really nice to get to that place with somebody.

**Ken:** It's comfortable and then it becomes, the creative environment grows from that because there's no technicality pauses or less technicality pauses and stuff that you just let the creativity flow.

**Sarah:** Oh yes. How long have you been working with Andre?

**Ken:** I think I started with the first record I did with him was 2008-ish.

**Sarah:** When we did like a turned-off on the conversation of trajectory, like we stopped at 2005. Where you land this job at this nice shop, sorry I'm not using the words right. You are making these connections because you're fixing, repairing and then getting invited into studios. What would you say was your first significant job as an engineer?

**Ken:** The Andre session, the first session I did with him.

**Sarah:** Oh seriously? That came like three years later. In between there you just worked at that studio and built up?

**Ken:** Building connections. Then that was the big break for me.

**Sarah:** Oh, how did he find you?

**Ken:** I met him at the shop and he bought some new gear that he needed installed at his studio. I went to go install it and then he just happened to mention, he was like, ''Do you engineer also?'' I was like, ''Yes.'' He was like, ''I got to record this rap feature. Can you do that tonight?'' I was like, ''Yes.''

**Sarah:** Oh, and you showed up. Cool. I have some questions about how you get paid as an engineer because I find that amazing. Or just not actually amazing. It's a total freaking like, I don't understand it. As an engineer, do you have like say for that Andre, do you have a retainer? Because it seems like he works with you a lot. Is it monthly you have a retainer and you're just on call for Andre?

**Ken:** I've had gigs with retainers. I've never done that with him because it's often on when he decides to start or stop a project. It's always just been day rates with him, but I've done retainers with other producers that I've worked with.

**Sarah:** When you have somebody that is a significant client like Andre, you also have all these other clients that you're bringing in because you're making a living and money talks. How many people do you work with on average in a month?

**Ken:** For me, I don't do a ton of different things at this point. I think earlier in my career when I was doing more one-off sessions here and there, I would work with maybe half a dozen people a month. Usually, at this point I take bookings for full projects. Once I book a project, I'm on that for a couple months and then look for the next project.

**Sarah:** If in terms of project, would you define that mostly usually as an album?

**Ken:** Usually it's an album or an EP or a soundtrack, but just a complete volume of work in some way.

**Sarah:** How do you think people find you? You said you're not really on social media, it doesn't seem like you have to push the marketing thing too much.

**Ken:** It's mostly word of mouth, which is how it always is in the creative world. I'm assuming you enjoy the same thing. It's like--

**Sarah:** Joy is very different because it's such a product that you're selling into a client base that's not typically you don't have a lot of repeat, you do when you build up your brand. For the most part, it's not necessarily that I am finding that it has been word of mouth with the new type of work I'm doing which is consulting or podcasting. The most recent big project I got was definitely because I reached out and I had a connection there.

**Ken:** It's mostly word of mouth because other than that it's say, I don't know, all US engineers produce, like the music industry is so much smaller than people think it is or at least on the behind the scenes guys. We all know each other and it's like, "Oh this project is perfect for this guy or this guy." t's mostly word of mouth. I get a lot of studios that I've worked at before, they get a certain client and then they're like, ''Oh we're trying to do this.'' They're like, ''Oh, you should call Ken or you should call whoever's they think is the right person for that project.''

**Sarah:** That makes sense that there's certain types of genres that you gravitate towards. What would you say is your specialty?

**Ken:** I actually weirdly had a conversation about this, or a friend of mine had a conversation with me about it. He was like, "Man, you have a niche." At first, I was a little bit offended because I was like, "No, I'm versatile." [crosstalk] He kind of put me in a box. [laughs] Then I realized what'd he called it. He called it like, urban creative. You do urban creative projects.

I was like, "Okay." He started listing out some of the credits. I was like, "Okay, that makes sense." Where it's like R&B‎ or hip-hop projects that traditionally, these days is a lot of keyboard, computer, or drum machine production, but it's when those projects want to do it all with live instrumentation. I end up getting a call for those projects a lot.

**Sarah:** Oh okay. I was going so much more planned, I was like, hip-hop, country, pop music. Of course, you're far more specific in that. Oh, that's interesting. You probably relate that to what? What your most experience has been or because you started as a musician?

**Ken:** I started as a musician, I started as an engineer recording a lot of local indie bands, and started out with a very rock background with live instruments. Then I had a job on a retainer with Tricky Stewart for a while. He's very drum machine, keyboards, pop production. I got to learn that workflow and a live tracking workflow. When the guys are doing projects like the Jon Batiste album, where it's like he recorded everything live but then needs to do a lot of these pop-style edits. I had experience in both sides.

**Sarah:** Okay. Can you give some examples of artists or just name artists you've worked with that I might know? I don't know. Jon Batiste, I recognize.

**Ken:** Jon Batiste is one of the last projects I've done. I worked with a bunch of people through the time that I was with Tricky Stewart. It was when Tricky Stewart and The-Dream, they were like a producer-writing team, was doing really well. I got to work on a lot of cool projects through them.

**Sarah:** I don't know who Tricky Stewart is. I'm so sorry. I'm going to Google it though. Right after this.

**Ken:** Then I say one of the cool artists I've gotten to work with is Solange.

**Sarah:** You got to work with Solange on what?

**Ken:** Seat at the Table.

**Sarah:** Oh cool.

**Ken:** A lot of the stuff I've been with Andre, so long like I got brought into through that too. He was co-writing a song, then we worked, and then I ended up working on even more of the album, outside of that.

**Sarah:** That makes sense. I asked you on Season Five of *Perceived Values* about transitions. I think I just sought a view because you moved from New York City back down to LA, oh, not LA sorry. Atlanta. How long did you live in New York?

**Ken:** I was up there for just under five years.

**Sarah:** What made you initially move to New York?

**Ken:** Honestly, it feels like everything circles back to Andre because-**[inaudible 00:33:36]** [crosstalk]

**Sarah:** I know you're a freelancer, but he sounds like he's your main.

**Ken:** He is. I was up there working on a project. I was in a hotel room for three months. Living in a hotel room, I've done it a lot. It sucks. It sounds cool, but it's not because it's like you actually never feel like you really get off work because you're not going home, to any of your belongings. After three months of being in a hotel, I was like, you know what? I've always want to live in New York. I'm just going to move.

**Sarah:** Have you ever had that conversation with Andre where you're like-- You were just talking to me about it, where you were just in LA for three months. Does Andre ever have this conversation with you where he is like, "Hey Ken, I'm moving to LA now." Do you either move there or just expect to be in a hotel a lot?

**Ken:** No. He never mentions it that way. He's just like, "Hey, can you come out for a month?" I'm like, "Yes, sure." Sometimes it just keeps getting extended.

**Sarah:** [laughs] Then you're like, "Damn it, I'm just going to move here." Do you miss New York?

**Ken:** I do.

**Sarah:** I know that the pandemic really shifted a lot of your work. Can you describe why you moved to Atlanta? The timing of it?

**Ken:** This is about a year into New York not really opening up. I think at this point you could sit outside of those fake parking structures to drink, but you couldn't go inside anywhere yet when I was living. I got booked for a project that was going to be about two months here in Atlanta. I was about to just go down and do the project. I was like, "Wait a minute, I've been spending New York cost of living money for a whole year without really being able to work. Why am I going to keep doing it? I'm just going to move to Atlanta during this project, then I'll figure it out from there."

**Sarah:** You say that casually, but I'm like, "Damn." Moving is a lot of work unless you're a minimalist. I looked in your bedroom, you actually don't have that much stuff. Did I see a gold rec-- did I say a record framed on your floor?

**Ken:** Dude, there's a couple that I still haven't put up.

**Sarah:** Are you kidding me? Is that what I thought I saw? Is it gold?

**Ken:** Yes.

**Sarah:** Is it real gold?

**Ken:** Well, it's just the RIAA plaques for when an album sells X amount of records.

**Sarah:** I've seen them on MTV cribs, dude, but what I'm asking is, as a metalsmith, are they actually gold? They must be gold-plated.

**Ken:** I'm not sure honestly.

**Sarah:** I'm about to bust that open and check the metal.

**Ken:** The plaque companies charge a lot, so hopefully, it's real plated. I don't know.

**Sarah:** Oh, interesting. Ken, do you have a Grammy in the other room?

**Ken:** No.

**Sarah:** Where are your Grammys at?

**Ken:** It's in the mail, I think. [laughs]

**Sarah:** Oh, okay. Everyone I'm friends with Ken online. Is that your first Grammy you won?

**Ken:** Yes, my first Grammy trophy.

**Sarah:** Oh, I didn't realize that. Congratulations.

**Ken:** Thank you.

**Sarah:** You have a Grammy in the mail?

**Ken:** I think it's in the mail. It takes a while. I've worked with a lot of people that have won, so I know it takes a while for those to show up.

**Sarah:** Oh, cool. What did you win a Grammy for?

**Ken:** It was with Jon Batiste. For his album, *We Are,* for album of the year.

**Sarah:** Oh damn. I should have paid more attention. I didn't really realize that. Now I'm a little embarrassed. When you win a Grammy, did they pay you any money for that, or is it just you won a Grammy?

**Ken:** No, you don't really get any money. Well, it helps because we're all pretty much freelance. It helps with calls. You will notice some extra calls coming in. Then when you are negotiating a project that helps-- It's a resume piece. I guess that's the best way to put it.

**Sarah:** That's a nice resume piece. Congratulations on the Grammy. You worked with Jon. Have you gotten extra calls? Do you feel like things are like people, you got some extra --?

**Ken:** I did. It was right afterwards I definitely noticed some calls for projects that I really wasn't able to capitalize on because I was in the middle of another project. It definitely makes a difference.

**Sarah:** That's something I guess I didn't really think about too is that you have this immediacy in your field where individuals maybe don't want to have to wait to work with somebody.

**Ken:** That and then it's just like, I don't know like everything's forgotten so quick too. It's like you're only as good as your last credits.

**Sarah:** Oh, damn.

**Ken:** It's crazy, like it's fast.

**Sarah:** It moves quickly. Are you in the middle of a project right now?

**Ken:** I am.

**Sarah:** Oh, you are. Who are you working with right now?

**Ken:** I'm doing a project with Andre, but I can't disclose what the project is at this time.

**Sarah:** Oh, that's fine. You're working on a project with Andre, right now. Do you have any other projects that you bring on? On the side.

**Ken:** Yes. When I'm working on a big project where I'm involved in it, in production, recording, and all the way. Usually, my side project ends up just mixing records on the side because I can't really dive into a whole other project at the same time.

**Sarah:** You said you were going to be busy tomorrow working on a mix project?

**Ken:** Yes.

**Sarah:** Can you say who it is?

**Ken:** I can't.

**Sarah:** Is it someone famous? Just kidding. [laughs]

**Ken:** It's just usually projects are really private until they're released because nobody wants to announce something, then at some point, they're like, "Oh, we don't want to put it out." They don't want to create that.

**Sarah:** Oh, right. I get that. Then of course, your time is also filled with helping jewelers slash podcasters finish up their sound or fix their sound, thank you so much. Guys, in case you're wondering, my rate was two beers and two shots. He's like, "Dude, don't put that on the air. Oh my God, I'm going to kill you."

Where are you going? You're opening the fridge in the middle of my interview with you. Yes, grab me a drink. Yes, that's nice. Ken, one thing we did talk about in our pre-interview happy hour was your breakdown of how you came to establish your rates and then how you came to establish ways that you give discounts.

**Ken:** I'm not necessarily comfortable going into my exact rates for projects because it varies a lot. I have my ideas of fixed rate depending on the size project, it is but when I'm offering discounts and I've given this advice to a lot of my assistants, it's like, "I don't necessarily be like, 'Okay, let's do this 10-day project. Let's say it's a day rate and do a 10-day project and then they want it cheaper, they can't pay just for numbers, just for round numbers. Let's say 500 a day for 10 days is 5000, and they're like, "Oh, we can only afford 4 grand for this project. If I agree to do that, instead of invoicing them 400 a day for 10 days, I'll invoice some for 500 a day for eight days and two free days because then it keeps my day rate at a certain place.

**Sarah:** It's the precedent. You're like, "Oh no," because they'll come back to you and be like, "Oh, but on this invoice, we got you $400 a day."

**Ken:** What happens and it's happened to me before and the reason I do this is they'll come back to you and then they'll have a one-day project for you but "Well, last time you were only 400," and then you got to explain. It's like, "Well, I only did it at 400 a day because of the bulk, it's like a bulk discount, so I found it easier to just bill your normal day rate and mark it as a free day.

**Sarah:** That's great. I'm going to rephrase that in a way where it's like you never lower your minimum, but you give a discount on top of it so they understand what your bottom line is.

**Ken:** It needs to be shown because whatever your lowest number is, is going to become your number eventually.

**Sarah:** I say that all the time to students. I think that's really important as a jeweler when someone wants to get something from you and you want to give them a discount, that's fine, but let them know the full cost and then let them know what you're giving as a discount, so they don't set this expectation that the price that you're giving them at a discount is what it is.

**Ken:** Exactly, because especially same with freelancing, most of my work is word of mouth. Somebody else has worked with me is talking to somebody else, and then if they come to me and I give them so and so rate but, "Well so and so recommended you and he said, you only did this."

**Sarah:** Right, you have to keep that standard across the board. It's not you have a website where your rates are noted. You don't do that, yes, of course. Well, without divulging the exact numbers, I do have some questions about that, if that's okay. Over the years, I know how my value increases as I work or how value fluctuates based on the materiality of my work, if I'm working in gold or silver, et cetera. You talked about the scope of the project sure, but as you've gone into this, you've been doing this full time since 2005, 2006 somewhere in there.

**Ken:** Full-time since 2010.

**Sarah:** How do you stop and re-evaluate your value as a producer? The Grammy must be a pay bump.

**Ken:** Well, I'm actually in the middle of figuring that out right now on that bump. Yes, it's hard because you got to go project by project. A lot of times projects have a fixed budget. [crosstalk]

**Sarah:** And if you want the project really-

**Ken:** It depends if I really want that project, you're going to be able to get a better discount out of me than if I'm not that into it. At the same time, you had to be paid what you're worth. A lot of times what it comes down to on scales because I'll do a lot of independent projects or small label projects for way less because I want to work on them and then major labels you got to do at certain rates because you also have to deal with the really complicated billing process with them. It's going to take a couple of months to even see that money.

**Sarah:** Okay, question because Brian, who's Atlanta-based, has this iconic story. He talks about *Hotel California* because he had a friend. Has he ever said the story to you?

**Ken:** Mm-mm.

**Sarah:** Okay, I love the story. He talks about the story where his friend was an intern at the studio where Eagles recorded *Hotel California*. At the end of the rap they threw him, half of a royalty or a percentage of a royalty or something like that for being the dude that went out and got them cigarettes and sandwiches or whatever and dude has like-

**Ken:** That's a lot of money for that slot.

**Sarah:** Because this guy just happened to be the dude that was buying cigarettes for the Eagles and got a percentage of a royalty, he has been set up in life in like a ridiculous way because of the money that's brought in. Now as an engineer does that come into play for you, like royalties, is that a thing anymore?

**Ken:** Not very often.

**Sarah:** When would that be a thing?

**Ken:** Major artists and labels don't offer you points on records.

**Sarah:** But the point system still exists?

**Ken:** Yes. They'll pay whatever it costs to not give you points so they pay you more for your work. Then what happens usually the only time unless you're really doing production, you get points for that, but if you're just engineering, you don't get points on that. The only time that usually comes up for an engineer or somebody in that situation would be it's an indie artist that can't actually afford your rate, so you give them a discount. They'll be like, "We'll pay you this amount, but we'll give you this amount of points on the recordship."

**Sarah:** Okay, that makes sense. Have you gotten points on records on that?

**Ken:** I have done it that way. It almost never works out because there's so much music created and most stuff doesn't blow up. I've done it, I'll still do it here and there because I guess what it takes one smash single to make all of those worth.

**Sarah:** Yes and what is *Hotel California* it's the most played song of X blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, that's why that story is so hilarious to me.

**Ken:** Obviously, they wouldn't have offered him a point, if they didn't get along with them, so he was still a good assistant, intern.

**Sarah:** He's a good guy. I have no idea but so the story goes. I'm going to compare it to a modeling career, a model ages and so they're outside beauty or what the beauty standard fades. They have a limited time that they know they could really bring in the money. Is that the same thing for engineers in a way where as you age you might become less wanted?

**Ken:** No, I think it's totally different than that because, for us, we're in control of that.

**Sarah:** You're like a fine wine, you get better with age.

**Ken:** Sometimes, sometimes you don't, but it's like it happens both directions. You can keep learning the new gear and the new sound, but at the same time, let's say there are a lot of engineers that do fall off because they get so stuck in their workflow. You could think of it in the '90s so many drop off where everybody was, "I'm only going to record the tape, I'm not doing this digital thing."

**Sarah:** Oh yes, I got a lot of tapes because of that.

**Ken:** Yes and then you knock yourself out of future work really, so you can date yourself but it doesn't happen to you.

**Sarah:** What are ways that you've had to upkeep? Have you have a upkeep?

**Ken:** It's keeping aware of the new software trends and not avoiding them and then yes, paying attention to the radio, so that you understand how music is evolving.

**Sarah:** I do remember you put some little rant online that I really loved **[inaudible 00:49:54]**. What was it Spotify or something that sounds shit, what was it?

**Ken:** I said Apple Music sounds far better than Spotify.

**Sarah:** Oh, okay.

**Ken:** It's does, it's just a lower sound quality on Spotify but Spotify is great because their algorithms are great and I think it introduces a lot of people to projects that they wouldn't have necessarily gotten introduced to.

**Sarah:** I love how you say projects, where I'm like, Oh you mean artists or records? That's what you hear in your head you say project. I'm going to start saying project. I sound more like an engineer. Oh I love this new project.

**Ken:** It's just a project for me. It's like--

**Sarah:** I like that. That's good. I'm not picking on you, it's fun. Is there anything we haven't covered that you think I should think about to ask you? Because I have no experience in the engineer world. What do you get a record like that for though, in your room? That's one question I have. What does that even mean?

**Ken:** That's sales, it means I've recorded the album and for a gold record, it means it sold at least 500,000 units. Actually, they made the rules because that's based on CDs and records. I don't remember what the stream numbers convert to but it got X amount of streams is what it is these days.

**Sarah:** Oh, who's that record for?

**Ken:** Frank Ocean, Channel Orange.

**Sarah:** Are you kidding me? You worked on that album?

**Ken:** I did.

**Sarah:** What? Remember that question I asked a while ago where I was like, "Is there any like significant artist you want to like bring up that you've worked with?"

**Ken:** Yes, he was actually my very first Grammy nomination.

**Sarah:** Oh really? How many times have you been nominated for Grammy?

**Ken:** Three.

**Sarah:** Have you ever gone to the Grammys?

**Ken:** I have.

**Sarah:** You have? Who did you take? Did you take your mom as your date?

**Ken:** I went solo.

**Sarah:** You went stag to the Grammys?

**Ken:** Yes.

**Sarah:** Can I go the next time you go?

**Ken:** Sure.

**Sarah:** I love dressing up and I'm a jeweler, so I'll deck you out. [crosstalk]

**Ken:** I was at the studio working. Then I thought I was going to be in the studio and I ended up having the day off.

[crosstalk]

**Sarah:** You just casually rolled into the Grammy?

**Ken:** In a way, so I was just like, "Okay, I guess I'll go."

**Sarah:** Oh my God. Ken you're killing me right now. That is really funny. My brother's going to the Emmys next year because his partner got nominated and I'm like, "Yo, can you get like a plus plus one? How do I get to go to the Emmys?" It just seems like it would be fun. I've actually heard that award shows are pretty boring.

**Ken:** It's really boring.

**Sarah:** You have to sit there for a sec. Is it--

**Ken:** It's super boring.

**Sarah:** Is it free? Do they feed you? Is there free food or is it free drinks? What is it?

**Ken:** No.

**Sarah:** There's not even--?

**Ken:** There's a bar. But it's not free. You have to pay.

**Sarah:** You have to pay for drinks at the Grammys.

**Ken:** Yes.

**Sarah:** You got to be kidding me, I'm disappointed.

**Ken:** It's really boring because you got to think also during the telecast how many commercial breaks there are. You're just sitting there.

**Sarah:** Oh my God, you're right. This is all like registering now. I would still go to be bored with you. We could like pack a deck of UNO cards in my purse. And play Uno in commercial breaks.

**Ken:** I think the Emmys is the same way probably but with the Grammy is like they only televise 10% of the awards, so it's all day long.

**Sarah:** That's way too long. We'll rethink this. Ken, thank you so much for helping me with my song. You guys, I was plugging my headphones in to the wrong place in my interface the last four and a half years, Ken just hooked it up. That's an exciting discovery. I always used to use Pro Tools first and thought that my new computer wasn't compatible with my license for it and Ken figured that out for me, which is like, you just changed my life. I'm so happy to be back at like a DAW. Is that how you say that DAW? I always like digital audio workspace.

**Ken:** Digital audio workstation.

**Sarah:** Workstation not workspace. You obviously, are the professional here but I'm so happy to be back at it. Ken, thank you. Is there anything else that you think we should mention before we wrap things up and go swimming?

**Ken:** I got nothing.

**Sarah:** Not only is Ken a great podcast guest he also has a pool, guys, so I'm winning all around here. He's just laughing at me. Ken, you're great, thank you so much.

**Ken:** Thank you.

**Sarah:** All right, everyone. This has been another episode of *Perceived Value*. The podcast broaching the subject of value with creatives such as my friend, Ken. Until next time.

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**[00:55:21] [END OF AUDIO]**