

## Full transcript of the *Growing up with gal-dem* episode Lila Iké

The hosts of this episode are Niellah Arboine and Natty Kasambala. The guest on the show is Lila Iké. This transcript is a verbatim transcript, and we are using verbatim transcription to capture the conversation:

- Non-verbal communication will be indicated within square brackets, e.g. **[laughter]**
- Overlapping conversation will be indicated with a forward-slash, e.g. **/me too!**
- Pauses will be indicated with ellipses, e.g. **It took me (...) a while**
- Interruptions will be indicated with a hyphen, e.g. **I was reliev-**
- Titles of books, publications, films, or brands will be indicated in *italics*, e.g. ***gal-dem***

Voices will be named with their full name for the first sentences, and then by their initials going forwards.

Natty Kasambala to NK

Niellah Arboine to NA

Lila Iké to LI

### **Transcription:**

#### **Intro music:**

*gal-dem* clapping with intro chant: *g - a - l - d - e - m!*

*[laughter]*

**Natty Kasambala** Welcome back to a brand new season of *Growing up with gal-dem*. A *gal-dem* original podcast inspired by our book *I Will Not Be Erased: Our Stories About Growing Up As People Of Colour*.

**Niella Arboine** My name is Niellah Arboine, and I'm the life editor at *gal-dem*.

**NK** And my name is Natty Kasambala, I'm a former editor, and long time contributor at *gal-dem*.

**NA** *gal-dem* is an award winning media company committed to sharing the perspectives of people of colour from marginalised genders. Each week, we invite a guest to respond to old diary entries, letters or text messages from their younger selves. The point is to nurture important discussions about growing up.

**NK** You can find *Growing up with gal-dem* on *Apple podcasts*, *Spotify*, the *Acast* app, or wherever you get your podcasts.

**NK** Lila Iké is a singer songwriter born and raised in Manchester, Jamaica. Known for her silky smooth vocals, fire freestyles and no nonsense lyrics, she's become one of the most sought after musicians to emerge from the island. Taken under the wing of reggae artist, *Protoje* in

2015, and collaborating with artists such as *Royal Blu*, and *Koro Fyah*. Lila released her debut album, *The Experience* in 2020.

**NA** Thank you for joining us today. How are you?

**Lila Iké** I'm well, thanks so much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

**NA** Lovely to have you.

**NK** We were just talking briefly about your first scheduled show for the post COVID world. So it made me curious, like, how have the last few years been for you? Like, did you stay in Jamaica the whole time? Have you been able to keep the creative juices flowing? All of that stuff?

**LI** Yeah, the past year has been pretty hard. I mean, I feel like that's the case for a lot of creatives, you know, not being able to fully extend your wings and do exactly what it is that you want to do. But I've been blessed with the opportunity to meet some really cool people. I was working with one of my favorite artists, I got the opportunity to meet her and go in studio and do some music with her. So that was pretty cool. I really enjoyed that. On top of that we stayed, you know, working on music, because there was literally nothing else to do. So I really use that time to practice, you know, learning more about instruments and even production and stuff like that. So it's It's bittersweet. You know, it has brought really great opportunities. And it has also been a bit depressing, because it's just not what you know, life is supposed to be really. As it relates to the show, I'm very excited about that. I have that show in September in London, it's *City Splash*. I think Barrington Levy is supposed too, couple other dope artists from there. *Alicai Harley*, I'm excited to see her live because she's one of my favorite artists now. So I'm really looking forward to that.

**NK** Yeah, I think I was also just going to say that I think it'll be amazing to see people live again. Obviously, you had an incredible *NPR's Tiny Desk: Home* concert that gave everyone a taste. But yeah, it'll be great to see you in the flesh. And in the same lane. I wanted to hear a bit more about your relationship with *Protoje*. Because I think we talk a lot about these kind of chance meetings that artists have where they meet someone, and they feel like they connect and collaborate with someone on like a real level. And so I guess I wanted to just hear about how that all came about and what kind of journey you've been on with music ever since?

**LI** Okay, yeah, meeting *Protoje* definitely changed my life, I really- it's the space that he creates for us musicians to just be ourselves with the opportunity to learn and grow with somebody who is already a legendary artist, and somebody who's also really knowledgeable about, you know, our music history and music in general. And also someone that is really passionate about new talent. So working with someone like that, not only are you being exposed to the resources for creating some of the best music, like sound quality, you know, really great musicians to work with, amazing producers, you know, your songs are being mixed properly, so it can be played on a global scale. But he's also a really chill dude. You know, he can speak to him about whatever, you know, I came up with this song today. I'm having a little problem expressing this particular

idea. What do you think about it, and with his talent and just expertise in music, it's just it's an amazing energy to be around. And the fact that he's constantly seeking to just help young people excel, even outside of artists. He also works with a lot of young producers. So most of the guys worked on my first project, they're not the most popular producers, but they are some of the most talented. Maybe if you know I wasn't working with him, I'd be going the mainstream line of the most popular producers here, which might not have given me the exact sound that I need. Because for me, being in studio is like being at home, I need to be able to feel comfortable, because it takes a certain level of vulnerability to do exactly what we're doing. So he creating that space for me, I'd say is one of the most important things that you know, his and me, his relationship has provided for me in this and he's also a really great person outside of music, I can speak to him about whatever. And I just feel like when you have both of those things in music, you have a friend and you also have a mentor, they're going to be looking out for your best interest outside of just making bank as to make money. And that's just important for me.

**NK** That's really, really good point. So important to feel at home.

**LI** For sure.

**NA** Must be so nice having someone established in the industry who wants to help others and you know, share that kind of knowledge and artistry together. Would you say that's kind of across the board with other artists in Jamaica?

**LI** Yeah, he's really, that type of person, like *Jaz Elise* is one of the latest artists be added to the label. And I remember I was at a party, I met her and she came up to me and she's like, Oh, you know, I'm always such a huge fan. I'm like, well, thank you. Because at the time, you know, I wasn't even aware of the impact of the music then. And, you know, she was also saying to me, she wants to do music, but she's not really sure about how to go about it. And I invited her to one of my rehearsals, and I was like, you know, you can come through. And if you feel like singing something, you know, just to kind of hear where she's at. When she sang I was like, this girl is crazy. And I called *Protoje* the same day, and I spoke to him about it. And at the time, we were working on the *Rock & Groove Riddim* where we have, you know, me, *Jaz Elise*, *Sevana* and *Naomi [Cowan]*... At the time, it was just me and *Sevana* on the radio. And I was like, I think you should get this girl on it. And he was so open, he's like, you know, if you think she's good, then, you know, I trust your whole thing. Let's bring her in and work on it. And it was so easy. And I'd say, you know, that opportunity also changed her life and brought her into her element. So having somebody like that, that is very open. It's like, here we have another really great, amazing talent in the music, just because he was open to that. So it's very important. And it's really beautiful, especially as women, because we can't just pull up anywhere and say, Hey, you know, I want to be an artist, you know, you can easily get taken advantage of. And you know, it's just a great thing to have a man managing us and guiding us. And it has never been anything where we're in studio feeling uncomfortable.

**NK** I think you're so right. I was gonna say similar thing. Like, I had just been saying to these guys that I've just been seen so many Jamaican women in the music industry just thriving

recently. And it feels like everyone collaborates and supports each other so well. So I'm just really excited to see how the scene continues to grow and like go in so many different directions.

**LI** Sure, me too.

**NK** Yeah. Awesome. It would be great now, if we could get into your extract, which I'm super excited about. If you could tell us a little bit about when it's from, where it's from, any kind of context, is it from a *Facebook* profile?

**LI** Yeah, I actually wrote that when I made *Facebook*. I did that in... I think I was in third form. So it was probably 2009. So I was in high school and I got into *Facebook* and all those social media stuff pretty late because I couldn't have a phone. My mum was very strict. She wasn't into me being online and stuff. So that is even how my name came about because I had to come up with a name that she wouldn't be able to find me with on *Facebook*. And that's how Lila came about. So this extract is my bio that I wrote when I was making *Facebook*, you know, you get to speak about yourself or who you think you are at the time. So this is 2009 Lila, which is how many years is that? That's like, 12 years ago. So I'm 27 now so I was probably like 15. Yeah. So when Jamila told me that you guys wanted an extract, I was like, you know, I used to write a lot of poems and stuff, but I just can never find those books or, like, sometimes I'd be like, I wish I could find my songbook from like, primary school, because it would be amazing. To just, you know, just see where my mindset was, those could probably be some really cool banners, but I just have no idea where they are. And you know, my diary is like, that I can't tap into- I can't share what was written in those diaries [laughter]. So I was like, you know, I think I have this bio on *Facebook*. And I actually went on *Facebook* the other day, and was reading this, and I was just laughing to myself, like, what was going on? Yeah, so it's interesting that I get to do this now.

**NK** So were you a big journaler, like writing in your diary regularly as a kid?

**BLI** Yeah, I was really into writing down my feelings. Because I was a bit reserved as a child, I didn't really speak much. I just kept a lot of stuff in my head. So writing would always be the way how I would express it. So it was something I did a lot. It's like, hey, then there's like three exclamation marks. I don't know why I was so excited. [reading] I'm Lila, I'm a nice person. Music is my life. I'm really fun to talk to always have a listening ear, awesome people- with some more exclamation marks... Awesome people is what I'm into. Okay, now let's talk about my existence- existence is spelled XISTENCE, I thought it was cool. I was created like everyone else from the dust of the earth, placed in my mother's womb, which I was told to be called by the name, mother. Along the way, I don't know I got fucked up. I strayed from my stem in search of my roots, still oblivious of my existence. Until then, I've been pushed to the limits of my emotional threshold. Yet I still rise and brush off the dirt from my fall. Throughout my existence on this spectacular planet. I have come up with a solution to my behavior towards what society chooses to display before my eyes. I am number 000001 of 000001 of my kind, love in laymen terms, I'm freaking unique. So may say I'm normal, but whatever. Yay me #rastagyal.

**NK** Incredible. It's a work of art.

**LI** I don't know what was going on [laughter].

**NA** What did it feel like reading that extract 12 years after you wrote it?

**LI** For me? It's actually really beautiful, because I can clearly see that I was going through an existential crisis. Where because I can remember that Lila and I know that that's when I began to listen to a lot of music and got really into like rasta music listening to a lot of the new artists at the time, the *Protoje*, *Chronixx*, *Jesse Royal*, and I was like, you know, while these guys are actually doing reggae music in this time, like the reggae music I'm used to, in countries like *Buju Banton*, *Garnett Silk*, *Sizzla Kalonji*, *Marcia Griffiths*, all people who to me at that time was like super grown and only grown people understand this kind of meditation. But then when I saw *Chronixx*, and *Jesse Royal* and *Protoje*, I was like, hold on, but these guys are not much, you know, older than me, and they're alive, and well, and currently doing the music. So for me, it was like listening to everything that they were saying and trying to find myself in the interim. And I think that's what was really going on here. I was really trying to find me, you know, understanding who I am and what is it that I really want?

**NK** Yeah, I love that about this extract. Because there's like, on the visual side of things, when I look at it, it just reminds me of like, I don't know, like such a great time online where I think so many of us are so open and like enthusiastic and we're just like, this is me. Haha, like aren't I so weird and kooky [laughter]. But then at the core of it like, there's so many, like, philosophical, like gems in there that really like kind of take you out of what you're saying for a second. You're like, Whoa, this kid was like, clearly like thinking deeply. And one of my favorites was where you said, I've strayed from my stem in search of my roots. And as like a 25 year old now I feel like that's something I can relate to, you know, when you leave home and you're kind of like Okay, well, who am I? Where am I? Like, what do I want to do? What makes me happy? But I guess I was curious to hear like, what do you think you were kind of referencing at that point? And do you feel like you ever found it?

**LI** I strayed from my stem in search of my roots... Yeah, I really think you know exactly what you were saying. It's like, I've always felt even within my household, I've always felt extremely different from my sisters, because I have three other sisters, I have an older sister who is like two years older than I am. And then I have two younger sisters who are like, three years younger, another one's four years, five years younger, something like that. But it's like, I've always felt like that child in the household that nobody completely understand. Like, when the stuff that they were into, it just never really stood out to me, you know, the stuff, they wanted to watch, the music they'd be listening, I was always very different. So I feel straying from my stem here is, as you say, just branching out from you know, the environment that I am in and trying to find people or energies that feels more familiar to me. So I think that's what that was.

**NK** Interesting. And do you feel like in, I guess, the music that you were touching on before, and in your like relationships now, as an artist, you feel like you've been able to kind of find those roots and ground yourself?

**LI** Yeah, I really feel like and that's one of the reasons why I think it is very, very important for artists of any kind to just be very aware of what they're putting in their music, because I feel like when I really began to delve into reggae music, and I actually began to listen to everything they were saying, I watched all the interviews, I'd read the books that they were suggesting to be read, I started doing yoga, after learning about it, I started, you know, buying crystals and meditating is like, I really got into, because I was drawn to it, I really delved into experimenting with what I was hearing. And I feel very proud of myself that I kind of went that route. Because just imagine pouring all that energy into something that was a bit more negative, or, you know, something that wasn't something that was going to help me to grow. So I really feel like the music and also just how I was raised too. Because in the same breath, my mum is like, I don't think she even think she understands how powerful she is just as a woman and just watching her as a single mother with four girls, she's dropped out of school, and she was in high school and just watching her settle and ensuring that we have the best opportunities. It was also something that inspired me, I'm like, I want to be as boss as my mum. But I also want to, you know, go beyond her understanding of a lot of things because I know there's stuff she don't get, you know. So for me, it's like, it's a mixture of all of that and meeting people, branching off, living on my own, experiencing a lot of stuff as it relates to being, you know, a 20 year old girl living in Kingston, having no family there, knowing very few people in a city that can get very violent. You know, it's all of that mixed in one that kind of curated where I am right now. And the music definitely played the most important role, because that's where I was learning, you know how to become.

**NK** Yeah, that's super interesting. I've never heard anyone describe themselves in that way of like, when you're first coming to music, when you're a music fan, how much that can shape who you are in the future. Like, I'd never really thought about how the stuff you kind of consume is it shapes what you listen to next, and what you do and who you think is like, a good role model and all of that. So that's definitely something for artists to think about.

**LI** It really is. And, you know, we see it every day, you know, like not to cut you, but it's very influential, the music like even in America, like, you'd see how the rappers and then wearing their chains and how they dress, even here in Jamaica, it's a huge influence, like everybody's into getting, you know, diamonds with their names on it, and rolexes. And mind you, even if they're fake, they're just like, oh, they're doing it because that's what they're seeing. You know, everybody wants to dress how the most popular person is looking. Even in high school, we experienced it, you know, yeah, the popular girls and everybody want to be like the popular girl. So it's the same thing across the board. When you have a platform and an influence. You have to be careful with what you do with it.

**NA** I was gonna ask as a fellow existential kid, when I read this, I was like, Oh my god, this is very much how I was feeling around this age as well. Do you still like think about the big

questions like your existence, your purpose? And how do you kind of stay grounded? I feel like when you- for me at least thinking of these really big ideas, I kind of just like, float off, and I could think about it forever. How do you deal with it?

**LI** You know, I think what it is, is as you grow, you begin to understand more stuff. But the more you understand, the more you want to know. So it's like, for me the opportunity to have my music to express my emotions and to sing about whatever it is that I'm feeling, it kind of releases the constant being in my head, if I didn't have this opportunity to do that and share it, it's almost like I get to speak to everybody in the world about what I'm going through. And then when it is that you go on a stage and you perform, it becomes a conversation because you get to actually see how people are responding. And, you know, I sing a song, like where I'm coming from. And I realised that everybody basically has the same story one way or another. And so you begin to feel more comfortable in yourself that okay, maybe I'm not a creep, or weird or something, maybe people do get it. At least one person in this crowd is like, freaking out because they're going through the same thing. So for me, it's like, the questions are going to always exist, because as I get older, and I go to different places, and I meet different people, you know, I spent my birthday in Mexico, and I was talking to some people who were into Ayahuasca, and all of those things. And, you know, it also opened up another thing to be interested in. And another thing to tap into and learn about, so I just feel like life is, you're always going to be asking those questions, you know, but for me, personally, music has provided me with the peace of mind and the comfort to know that at least I have this thing here that I can use to express.

**NK** Amazing. Yeah, I was also going to say I do also identify as the existential angsty kid. We are the existential angsty support group here, right now [laughter].

**LI** I feel like is the thing with our generation, we kind of were the type, you know, we were just those beings.

**NK** Going from what you were just talking about, and how music became that outlet for you. And you obviously, you mentioned in the extract that music is your life at that point. And you've said how you kind of discovering one of these artists, I guess I wanted to ask, like, from this point like, that you're at... How did you get to the point where you were able to kind of write songs and create these whole kind of soundscapes that expressed what you wanted to express and that part of your musical journey going from being a fan to being your own creator?

**LI** Yeah, that I have no idea. I kind of just walked into it, you know, I really can't explain how it happened. There's a lot of time, I'm in a moment where it's like, wow, I cannot believe that this is me, I drive past places that I used to live, I go back and check some of the guys you know, from some of the, you know, the ghetto communities where I used to live in and they're like, yo, we always saw it because you were just always on the move. Like I remember, every time we saw you had a guitar in your hand. At the time, I couldn't even play it. But it's like, when you become obsessed with learning and growing, you don't even realise how much you're changing. It's kind of like going to the gym and working out and I'm like, Oh my god, I need my abs I need to, and

then you just wake up one day, and you're like, hold on, but I'm looking pretty toned. And like when did this happen? You know, so I feel like it's something that really and truly happens over time. And when you're wholeheartedly involved in the process and involved in being present in every day of it, you don't actually, really and truly understand how you got from point A to point B, you just know that you were kind of just living your way into it, you know, obviously took a lot of hard work, a lot of sacrifices, many nights, there was no sleep, wherever it is that there was karaokes or dances or any sessions that always be there. And then I'd have to get up in the morning and go to school. And then I'd have to leave school and go to work. You know, and that was my life for like about four years, then, you know, you put out a song and you realise, Oh, you know, people are into this and then you put out another song and before you know it, you realise that, you know I don't actually have to do a 9-5, and before you know it, you kind of remove yourself from certain situations and you're just living your dream. It's really something you work on every day.

**NK** I think that's such a good way of putting it. You're so right though. It's not like a cut off point. And you just kind of step over a line and then suddenly, you're an artist, you know?

**LI** And everybody's journey is different. So I don't want to say hey, this is how you become A star or a superstar from- you get me, everybody's journey is different for some people, it'll take them like, you put out a song today and tomorrow, you're like the biggest artists in the world. For some people, it'll take them 20 years. For some people, they'll die and never really experience the stardom. But they're like legendary, you know. So everybody's journey is different. You kind of have to just be present and live in the moment.

**NA** So true, it's not a one size fits all across industry for all musicians.

**LI** Otherwise, everybody would be [laughter].

**NA** Yeah.

**NK** I guess like coming back to your 15 year old Lila, who was writing this *Facebook* post, back in the day, who talks like, I don't know, for me to realise that you're only 15 when you wrote this, and you're talking about like, your emotional thresholds and like having risen have brushed off the dirt from your fall. It's like, it's so poetic, it feels like you've lived a million lives. If you could give any advice to that younger self who wrote that piece? What would you say to her?

**LI** I'd say I wouldn't even want to interfere with anything, because I feel like everything that happened from that point to where I am right now needed to happen. So all I'd say is, you know, keep at it. You're gonna be okay.

**NA** Yeah. Kind of like the butterfly effect. You don't want to change anything. [laughter]

**LI**The next day, she decides to be a ballet dancer. Just like, Oh, my God. That's not what I meant.

**NA** And yeah. Lastly, with your career so far, and everything you've done, what would your younger self think of where you are now?

**LI** She'd be freaking out. She'd definitely be freaking out. She'd be a fan for sure. You know, really be a fan. And she'd also be proud for sure.

**NK** Oh, she'd think it's super?

**LI** Yeah, for sure. Like, I'm just looking at her right now. She seems pretty excitable about a lot of things. So seeing her older self like... Sometimes I actually wish I could do that. You know, I wish I could actually, I wouldn't necessarily want to go in the future. Because I'm really into just seeing how life plays out. I feel like there's a beauty and seeing how life plays out. But I wish I could just go back. And just even that night, because I remember I was on my computer typing, and just look at her, you know, just look at her facial expression. And then, you know, tried to, if I could like hear her thoughts. It'd be really funny to just be like, wow, this girl is really going through it. Yeah, it's interesting. Yeah.

**NK** I feel the same as well. I think there's so much of like, those years when you're a teenager are so formative, like so important. And I always wish like, I could have known it more at the time and like taken in every single detail and could remember it. And it's why I'm always jealous of people who write diaries, because I would also love to like, read everything I'm thinking about every day I've had and like, yeah, I think it'd be really great to or not great. Probably quite sad actually to see some some parts of teenaghood [laughter].

**LI** But it's not too late. It's not too late. You know, because you're still young, you might want to start now. 20 years from this year looking back like, wow, could probably share it with your kids or whatever, you know, it's not too late.

**NK** Well, thank you so much, Lila. That was really great.

**NA** Thank you.

**LI** No, thank you guys. You guys brought me down memory lane. It's like, was a beautiful interview.

**NA** Yeah, it was really wholesome chat. It was lovely hearing about, you know, other musicians helping her and that kind of like camaraderie community in the music scene in Jamaica.

**NK** Yeah, I think Yeah, she was a really like calming presence, I think. I'm sure you can have some really like long, thoughtful, like deep chats with with Lila. Seems like that kind of philosopher type, which is my favorite. As a former philosopher myself.

**NA** I liked hearing about existentialism from-

**NK** Teen existentialism is no less.

**NA** And the big questions and yeah, I thought that was quite, they reminded me that we- a lot of people go through that when they're a teenager, don't they? But we don't necessarily talk about it.

**NK** Yeah, for sure. And I think especially in terms of like, I liked her approach to it, which was like, you're always going to have questions and you're always going to keep like growing and wanting to know more. And even just in terms of your life, like in your life purpose, like you're not going to get one answer, and it's gonna be like the silver bullet, you're gonna have to just keep working and training at living life and like, overcoming hurdles, always until suddenly, one day you realise like, everything's okay. So I thought that was like a really poetic approach or like perspective.

**NA** Yeah, and just how she uses music to now like, kind of ground her and help her with those big questions in life, which I think lots of people do.

**NK** Yeah, for sure. I mean, that's definitely what I do.

**NA** Basically, music is very grounding. And I can understand if you're thinking about your existence, and like space, and time, and all these big ass questions, just putting on a track can just bring you back to that moment, I can completely see where she's coming from.

**NK** Yeah, I totally agree. I think music for me, serves a similar purpose in terms of just like showing you that other people have the same anxieties as you because I think it's something that can be hard to talk about. Or I also feel really encouraged by what she was saying about, you know, that thing of like, it's never too late to start journaling and expressing those things in other ways. So, yeah, I'm gonna go buy another journal that I'm gonna write two pages in, and then leave it empty for the rest of the year. [laughter]

**NA** Do it!

**NK** I saw something really interesting, actually, someone was talking about self portraits recently, and how they can be like a really good way of like, visually kind of documenting your growth over years. And I've, I've never been a person who likes taking pictures of myself. But for a second, I was thinking maybe that would be a great way of like, not necessarily feeling like you have to kind of like, express everything you're feeling when you do but just kind of being able to like document where you were at. And like to be able to bring you back to Yeah, to certain times in your life. I think that's quite a beautiful idea.

**NK** This has been an *Ai Ai Studios* production.

**NA** Thank you SO much for listening. We really hope you enjoyed this episode. Don't forget, you can sign up to become a member at gal-dem.com for access to exclusive discounts with our favourite brands and partners, early access tickets for *gal-dem* events, an advance copy of our annual print issue, and so much more.

**NK** Make sure you're following us on all major social media platforms, @galdemzine, for the latest independent journalism, or you can visit our website which is G-A-L hyphen, (which is important) D-E-M.com. *gal-dem* has a book which is out now. It's called *I Will Not Be Erased, our stories growing up as people of colour*. You can find it in all good bookstores, or online.

**NA** If you loved this episode of *Growing Up With gal-dem*, be sure to subscribe, rate and leave a review.

**NK** We'll catch you on the next episode.

**Exit music:**

*gal-dem clapping with intro chant: g - a - l - d - e - m!*

*[laughter]*