

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION VII

Life, Family, and Faith 1

Art and Creativity 15

Fashion and Design 41

Collaboration 53

Music and Business 69

Education and Social Justice 95

Inspirations 111

SOURCES 123

CHRONOLOGY 133

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 146

INTRODUCTION

Pharrell Williams personifies talent. He is an individual who bends and transcends the many fields in which he creates. Pivoting among music, art, fashion, and design, he combines them in ways that are innovative and deeply conceptual. Remarkably prolific, generating projects at an astounding rate, Pharrell is mindful and deliberate in his thinking and his actions. He has described himself as a “spiritual unit of awareness,” and that approach—that sense of being part of a larger whole—is reflected in all he does.¹

Pharrell Williams is also a philanthropist who cares deeply about future generations. He is an outspoken advocate for social justice and the empowerment of women, for amplifying the voices of African Americans, and above all for the

importance of education in achieving a better world. “Education is the death blow to discrimination,” he has said. “Equality is achieved via education.”²

Pharrell was born in 1973 in Virginia Beach, Virginia. As a child, “I was like a nerdy little Black kid on a skateboard,” as he put it.³ He found his “inner sanctum” in music: at his parents’ churches, in his own experiences at band camp, and in pop-music favorites like Earth, Wind, and Fire, Stevie Wonder, and Steely Dan.⁴ Early in his career he worked with producer Teddy Riley on the 1992 Wreckx-N-Effect hit single “Rump Shaker.” A few years later, he produced N.O.R.E.’s single “Superthug” with his childhood friend and longtime collaborator Chad Hugo. With Chad, Pharrell created the duo the Neptunes in 1992, followed by the band N.E.R.D in 1999. The success of those groups accelerated both

men's careers and foreshadowed countless future collaborations.

Pharrell's unparalleled skills in the recording studio, his genuinely cooperative spirit, and his embrace of creativity in the production process have resulted in a string of collaborations that have all but defined popular culture over the past decades. To date, that output has earned thirteen Grammys, two Oscar nominations, and four Billboard number one hits. A small sampling of the musical talent Pharrell has worked with includes Ludacris, Jay-Z, P. Diddy, Britney Spears, Beyoncé, Justin Timberlake, Gwen Stefani, Madonna, Daft Punk, Tyler the Creator, Ariana Grande, and Kendrick Lamar. His work with these and other artists has been a defining influence on contemporary pop music—along with his chart-topping solo records, including the 2014 Grammy-winning album *Girl*.

No music is more closely identified with Pharrell than his 2013 single “Happy,” from the soundtrack album for *Despicable Me 2*. Irresistibly cheerful and inspiring, it is one of his enduring contributions to an uplifted global vibe.

That sense of uplift and unconventional thinking extends to his work in other areas. In his engagement with fashion, for instance, Pharrell has encouraged and embodied a rethinking of traditional masculinity, reflected in part in his unabashed embrace of fashion and luxury. It is also evident in the complex ways that, in matters of personal attire, he plays with color, form, and texture. Pharrell’s knack for combining historical styles with his own looser, more improvisational take on menswear has encouraged new approaches to masculine self-presentation, on an individual level and within the industry. Along with his labels Billionaire Boys Club and

Icecream, his work in fashion has included collaborations with Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Tiffany & Co., and other iconic brands.

In all areas, Pharrell's work is marked by openness and collaborative spirit. He is a boundless optimist who embraces and holds space for difference. His creative and philanthropic projects reflect a desire to elevate those around him, and to deflect the focus onto others—a leader who stays in the background, and a teacher, mentor, and role model who spotlights the talent he's working with. When discussing collaborations, he often speaks of channeling, of holding a mirror to help others see themselves. This is perhaps one of Pharrell's greatest gifts to a creative enterprise: he meets people where they are, then guides them toward their strongest and most fulfilling expressions. "I know my job," he has said. "I'm not a boxer, I'm a trainer."⁵

As the excerpts in this book reveal, Pharrell cares deeply about the future while actively shaping global popular culture today. In his public speaking, he often outlines our collective responsibilities in the fight for racial, gender, and economic equality. He expresses deep gratitude for what he has achieved and has been given, yet he insists that advantages and opportunities must be put to good use. “Privilege is a superpower if used to restore equality,” he has said.⁶ He is in many ways a feminist, uplifting women in his public speaking and philanthropic activities, and, in one particular case, with a leather jacket bearing the words “Women’s rights.”

Pharrell is deeply aware of his position as a cultural figure, the power that attaches to it, and the potential for doing good. He sees himself as part of a broader vanguard of cultural figures with similar aims. Music, he says, “is an incred-

ible power, and I am deeply grateful that I can write songs that communicate with people all over the world.”⁷

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1 India Ross, “Jupiter Ascending,” *Financial Times HTSI* magazine, October 1, 2022, 33.

2 (52)

3 (33)

4 (21)

5 (32)

6 (52)

7 (4)