Stanford



Benny Starr

U.S. Cultural Policy Fellow, Stanford Arts Office Programs

Bio

BIO

Benny Starr is an artist and cultural strategist whose practice spans hip-hop, film, facilitation, and policy. Raised in Pineville, South Carolina, Benny has a rare gift for translating creative process into shared language without compromising its essence, while restoring connection between what institutions often separate: art and culture, equity and labor, environment and spirit. He describes creativity as “the capacity to withstand the tension of opposites until a new form emerges.”

Music was Benny’s first public language. After leaving college at nineteen, he recorded a mixtape of all-original material and spent years in corporate telecommunications while writing his way toward the artist he was becoming. In 2017, he turned fully toward that path, having already weathered the deaths of his sister and grandmother within two years of one another, as well as a fire that claimed his family home. Speaking of the artistic axis on which he has spun for decades, Benny has said, “It saved my life. It’s helped me contextualize failure, and frailty, as well as what a community is.”

Recorded live with The Four20s before a sold-out crowd of one thousand at Charleston Music Hall, A Water Album was released on Juneteenth 2019. It was named South Carolina’s Best Album by Free Times and Album of the Year by both Charleston City Paper and Greenville Journal, and it made Benny the first hip-hop artist to perform at the finale of Spoleto Festival USA. In 2020, he co-directed, produced, and wrote Restoration: A Concert Film in partnership with Native Son and the Acres of Ancestry Initiative. The film amplified Black agrarian stories and the fight for restorative land justice, and earned Best Documentary honors at the Twin Cities Black Film Festival, the WorldFest-Houston Remi Gold, and the UMF Social Activism Award.

In October 2020, Benny was appointed the inaugural One Water Artist-in-Residence at the U.S. Water Alliance, advancing a national case that artists and culture bearers belong in the rooms where environmental, infrastructural, and policy decisions are made. The residency extended into a Senior Fellowship of Arts & Culture, and in 2021 Grist named him to the Grist 50. He has since served as a Learner-in-Residence with Spring Point Partners, the Creative & Cultural Strategist for Communities First Fund, and curator of the Opening General Session at WEFTEC 2023. He is currently a U.S. Cultural Policy Fellow at Stanford University, where he is examining the role of arts and culture as civic infrastructure. He is also a member of the inaugural class of Creative Futures Fellows at Stanford, where artists and faculty are rethinking the role of arts and culture in advancing democracy, equity, and human well-being amid questions of AI, climate change, and social inequality.

Benny is the creator of ACE, A Creative Exploration, a methodology that draws on hip-hop pedagogy and the contemplative work of the late Dr. Barbara Holmes, grounded in the relational pillars of environment, justice, labor, and spirituality. It reflects his belief that creative capacity isn’t a specialization reserved for the few, but a human inheritance many carry for years without ever being given language for it. That understanding continues to inform his

work across performance, institutions, cultural strategy, and his emerging Meaning work. He does this work as a Black Southern man who loves God, loves his people, and understands that creativity is inseparable from the work of “getting free.”

ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS

- U.S. Cultural Policy Fellow, Stanford Arts Office Programs

LINKS

- Learn More: https://www.bennystarrsc.com
- EP 25: Benny Starr: https://goodfolk.substack.com/p/ep-25-benny-starr
- Faces of Change: Benny Starr: https://youtu.be/aAuwlzVJNf4?si=Bh1yQAyU_6EjTAFW