

***This Being Human* Transcript**  
**Ep. 24 – Roni Helou**

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:**

My name is Abdul-Rehman Malik. I'm canvassing the world for the most interesting people, to hear about their journeys, their work, and what it means to be alive in the world today. And perhaps nobody has captured that experience, of being alive, better than the 13th-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Jalaluddin Rumi in his poem "The Guest House."

**FEMALE VOICE:**

This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:**

So welcome to *This Being Human*. A podcast inspired by Rumi's words and motivated by all those who carry that message forward in the world today. Today, I speak to a rising star from Lebanon's fashion scene.

**RONI HELOU:**

I wanted to create this controversy and kickstart the conversation again. And it hit me. *What if I put these pretty clothes on the garbage, on a landfill? Would people be interested?*

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:**

Roni Helou puts a lot of thought into the messages he's sending with his fashion line. And he knows how to get people's attention. He is still in his 20s, but already runs his own brand, which has been featured at London and Paris Fashion Weeks and praised in industry magazines. His clothes are fresh but rooted in tradition: recycled materials with modern cuts; a style that looks both ancient and brand new; traditional and androgynous. He made a big splash in the media in 2019 when he staged a photoshoot on a literal mountain of garbage. We'll talk about why he did that, and we'll also hear about this new fashion scene rising in Lebanon. And about surviving the Beirut explosion of 2020. We started by talking about where his lifelong pursuit began.

**RONI HELOU:**

I was actually brought up in a middle-class family with my aunts. They were all into — from my dad's side — they were all into sewing. And my mom was like very much into clothing. She used to dress us as kids. You know, actually she used to upcycle her own clothes. So I started watching my mom and my aunts and I was intrigued in whatever

they do as a kid. And then, growing up, I think I was around the age of 12, I remember I saw my cousin creating this garment, and I wanted to do just like her. And I remember I would get plastic bags, like those big trash bags. And my sister, who was a year younger, I would make her stand, like stand still for, I don't know, like three or four hours. And then I would just kind of like glue or weld the plastic bags on her, trying to create, I don't know, a dress or something. And it started like that. And then after graduation, I was really lost in university, what I wanted to do. So I did one year of computer science and then two years of business marketing. I was good at business marketing. I really enjoyed it. But something did not click. I didn't feel complete yet. And that's where my parents actually interfered. And they asked me to go back to fashion school because back then, my cousin told me about this free fashion school in Lebanon called Creative Space Beirut. And I went there. I asked for an interview from the founder. I went there and once I saw it, I fell in love with the place, with the entire vibe. And that's when I realized that maybe this is what I'm meant to do in life. And one thing led to another and here I am, in 2021, with a brand, with my own brand.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

I have to say, I already love your parents. Which parent from a Middle Eastern background tells their kids, "No, we're not going to do engineering. No, this lawyer thing isn't for you. Business isn't for you. You have to do fashion." That's remarkable.

**RONI HELOU:**

Yeah, I have cool parents. [Laughs]

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

You know, Roni, most people's fashion sense, at least in my experience, starts to develop when they're younger, you know, when they're in their teens. And it sounds like you were someone who was already doing fashion. I want to know a little bit about Roni Helou's fashion sense. What did the teenage Roni Helou dress like? What were you attracted to? What excited you about clothes and fashion for yourself?

**RONI HELOU:**

Honestly, I remember, like, I used to like to dress up. So actually let me tell you also like some, a little bit of the background. So I started rescuing animals and getting involved in activism, in campaigns regarding animals, the environment and human rights in 2012. So I was like around maybe 18 years old or like 20 years old. And I remember back then my personality and my identity even really started to shape. And I remember very well that it was around that period when I started to feel more confident about myself as a person, you know. And before that I used to dress just like any other teenager. Whatever is trendy, I would get it and just put on whatever is trendy. But after that, I remember really well that I wanted to kind of like, to be different, to differentiate myself

and my style. And I wanted my style to reflect me as a person, who I really am. And that's when I started to actually stop buying clothes. And instead I would raid my father's closet and my grandpa's closet. Some pieces would date back, I don't know, 50 years. And I would take them and actually start shortening, tightening, like just upcycling them. And basically, since I would say, like, for the past nine years that my father's closet and my grandpa's closet turned into my closet. And that's all I wear.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

I love it. What did your dad and your grandfather think about you altering these classic clothes?

**RONI HELOU:**

Okay, it's really funny because my dad thinks I'm some lunatic because I just go and get stuff from his closet for him. These stuff are just for, you know, like for garden work that he wears them just whenever he has some work in the garden. So they are like trash for him. And he sees me like just really getting them and wearing them. And he's so like, he's so amazed. Like "What are you thinking? You're embarrassing me." And on the opposite side, my friends, especially from fashion school, they used to be like, they used to love those pieces. They used to think that my dad was like some sort of a fashion icon-addict. So, it's really it's funny because whenever I tell my dad that my friends were astonished by this, he would be shocked. Like the look on his face would be like, "What the hell are these people? Who are they?" You know, like "Where do they come from?"

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:**

Roni graduated from Creative Space Beirut in 2016. His brand and first collection were launched at Fashion Forward Dubai. Picture clothes from Roni's dapper grandfather recut with slits along the leg and buttons repositioned. The result is what you might call outside-the-box, even daring, evening wear. And he made an immediate impression. *Elle* magazine shouted him out, calling his work "impressive to say the least." And before long, *Vogue* was calling him "one to watch."

**RONI HELOU:**

It was amazing. There was so much pressure and so much responsibility on me, because I created this first collection, but then, I'm not here to create a collection. I'm here to create a brand. I'm here to create hundreds of collections, you know. And to create a brand that will survive, I don't know, a hundred years of our time. So then I had to create another collection. And then I started realizing that these people are starting to have expectations on me. And I'm just like a very young graduate who just graduated from fashion school, you know? But I was very lucky to have the mentorship of Creative Space Beirut and of Starch Foundation, who, really, like, directed me through, because

our industry is not as easy as people think, you know. As I said before, it takes a lot of investment. It takes a lot of dedication. It takes a lot of research. So at some point, like, you kind of feel that you like you need 100-percent dedicated to it. And literally forget about your social life, forget about anything else. And that's what I had to do. And obviously so it took a lot of sacrifice for the brand to grow and to really like to reach some international level of work and of reputation.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

You've spoken about your mentors and kind of incredible individuals in the industry and in this space who guided you and helped you and many of those names that you mention are names of women. And you've made it a point that as you've been building and creating your business, that women are the very heart of that business. And your mom and your sister helped you start your brand. Why has this been so important to you? Why has it been so important to centre women within your business?

**RONI HELOU:**

Listen, I think I was raised — so I was raised in a family, we were like, especially when it comes to cousins, we're very close to each other. A lot of my cousins are like, are women. And I have my sister and I have my mom. So, I was raised in an environment that really respects women and really acknowledges their success. You know, we have this patriarchy that still runs in our society. And so, I was really shocked by how a lot of people or a lot of my colleagues that I would consider, like, can be role models and things, had this idea, this this perception of women, how they're like inferior, women are inferior to men. And this used to provoke me a lot. And I made sure, like even within my family, I make sure to always inspire my sister, my mom. I want my mom, even at her age at 50 years old, to go and experiment and find new hobbies and always stay productive and feel ambition. Same thing with my sister. And with my cousins. So I've always had this support, you know, like this drive to support women, because I really feel —like I see the potential and I see the places that my cousins have reached in life. And I feel it's really sad for other women in our society for not to feel successful, for not reach the same heights in their life. And obviously, subconsciously, this was also reflected to my brand.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

You know, Roni, talking about your family and working with family comes with its own challenges. And I got to level with you. I love my mom. My mom was an incredible influence on my life, urged us to be creative, urged us to follow our own path. But I can't quite imagine working with her professionally. How have you managed working with your mom? [Laughs]

**RONI HELOU:**

So my family has always been supportive, but we only started working together end of 2019. When I moved and I bought my own, I moved to my own apartment and I had my own showroom. So we were expanding the business and then I'm like, "Mom, again we need you, like, we need you to discover new things in life. So come on, let's join the business. I want to turn this business into a family business. I want you to join." So, my mom started and literally it was really hard. It was really hard. We barely, like, we worked together for three months and then obviously the explosion happened.

*[SFX - explosions, sirens]*

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:**

On August 4th, 2020, a massive explosion went off in the Port of Beirut, caused by poorly stored ammonium nitrate. It killed over 200 people and injured 7,000 more. Parts of the city were leveled. It was one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history. For Roni and his family, it was a day that had started out like any other.

**RONI HELOU:**

Honestly, it was a normal day. Actually, it was a strange day, not normal, because for some reason, like now that I look back at it, I realized that a few things happened in a way that was not supposed to happen, that led to us surviving. You know, it was like, I don't know — it was maybe a miracle or, you know, like so, I was — during that time, I was working on a project outside of Beirut. And I was supposed to go there that day. My mom, my sister, who had recently, literally a week before joined the team. So my mom and my cousin who was visiting that day. So we were all at my house, working, but also like spending time because it was the lockdown back then. And these two days were like, things were opening up. I mean, I think the country was supposed to close again to go on lockdown in a few days. So we were all at my place having lunch. Because my cousin came, I decided to ditch the other project. I decided not to go there. So we all stayed at my house. And then my cousin was supposed to leave earlier. Actually, she was supposed to leave, and my sister as well. They were supposed to leave earlier, which literally would have killed them if they left earlier. But then, like, we ordered some food and the food got really late, like an hour or so late. So we were sitting in my bedroom and on the balcony of my bedroom. So my cousin was, actually she's a smoker. I'm not a smoker. No one's allowed to smoke inside the house. So she was smoking on the balcony with, so, basically the door, the balcony door was open. And because she was smoking, she was able to hear, like we all heard sounds of war planes. So she was able to hear that. So my sister has been traumatized since the war of 2006 from the sounds of war planes. So she immediately freaked out and like she harassed us all just to hide. It was because the sound was very high, if they weren't there, I believe I would have stayed in place. I mean I'm like, "OK, I would continue

working.” But it was them, their fear that pushed us all to just run to the corridor. And literally the second we got there, the entire house exploded and we got to safety because of that. All the glass shattered, the doors, the fake walls, everything shattered.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

I believe in miracles and that that sounds absolutely miraculous. You know, in the aftermath of that explosion, you know, we saw these kind of astonishing pictures, you know, from Beirut, almost unbelievable and unfathomable. This is your city. How have you seen the aftermath of the explosion, and the pandemic as well, affect Beirut and affect Lebanon?

**RONI HELOU:**

It was really honestly, it was really hard. Because, as a lot of people know, the area that was affected the most — which is the Ashrafieh, Mar Mikhael, Gemmayzeh area — is the creative district of Beirut. That's where all galleries, stores, concept stores, designers, ateliers, workshops, that's where all of them, or at least 80 percent of them, is based. And then so obviously being, working in this industry and having a lot of friends that live there, I was scared to death to call someone, like I did not check up on anyone because I was afraid that somebody would pick up the call and be like, “Oh, I'm sorry, they died.” I was extremely scared and it took me until literally like midnight till I went to my parent's house, relaxed a bit, ya know, like checked up on a few people, that I started making phone calls. And then talking to people, I realized the amount of damages that we all incurred.

And let's not forget that it was summer of 2020. The end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020 has been a very difficult year for Lebanese people. First, starting with devaluation of our currency, to the *thawrat*, to, you know, all the corruption and all — everything that's been happening in Lebanon. Add on the pandemic and the lockdowns. So we really suffered a lot and then came this. It was literally, it was despair everywhere and, speaking to my friends and speaking to people and see.. I mean, thank God we weren't physically hurt, my family and I, but I know a lot of people that lost neighbours, that lost friends, that lost husbands and boyfriends and partners. The blast obviously changed our entire lives. And after it, like, people had to rethink everything, you know, because actually during the blast, my mom, myself and my sister and I, were all in the atelier during the blast. So we were all traumatized, obviously, for a while. Still traumatized. Still suffering from PTSD, so.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:**

The explosion mobilized Roni. He swiftly turned his attention towards helping the people who weren't as lucky as he was.

**RONI HELOU:**

That's when that night when I decided that I want to launch a fundraiser, an initiative to raise funds to support at least my friends and the community that I personally know, which is the creative community. And that's when we launched the United for Lebanese Creatives fundraiser, and we managed to raise \$350,000 we distributed on creatives and creative businesses that were affected by the blast.

**DR. ULRIKE AL-KHAMIS:**

Hello, I am Dr. Ulrike Al-Khamis, the Aga Khan Museum's Director and CEO. We hope you are enjoying this episode of *This Being Human*. If you like what you hear, please support us by rating *This Being Human* on your podcast app or by leaving a review. By sharing your feedback, you will help us grow our audiences and reach more people with the podcast's extraordinary human stories wonderfully told. Thank you so much. And now back to *This Being Human*.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

I love the way your work, Roni, and your vision really emerges from the place that you're in, the people that are around you, the community that you surround yourself with. And that takes me back to one of your fashion shoots. And you did this one shoot, which became, it kind of became a global phenomenon because a lot of people were talking about it all around the world. You did a shoot at a landfill and you called it "Garbage Mountain." So we look at the pictures from the shoot and we see these people in these stunning clothes, stunning designs, standing in a garbage dump. Tell us the story of the shoot and why it was so important to you.

**RONI HELOU:**

We were dealing with the garbage crisis at that time. We're dealing for the past three years, I guess, it's been a while. But then at some point I realized that people just again, they got fed up with the topic and stopped talking about it while things weren't solved. You know, like, we were still dealing with the garbage crisis. There was still a lot of garbage on the streets. And people just, they really got fed up and they stopped, they didn't want to talk about it anymore. And I wanted to bring back the topic, but to put the spotlight on it again and then create a controversy, like bring back the conversation about the garbage crisis. I saw it as the perfect opportunity because I was creating these clothes that everybody was interested in. And then there's this message that nobody wants to talk about. And it hit me. What if I put those these pretty clothes on the garbage, on a landfill? Would people be interested, like, to still look at them and to start the conversation? I wanted to create this controversy and kickstart the conversation again. And we did it with the help of the amazing photographer and one of the founders of Creative Space Beirut, George Rouhana, and the models who literally, like, were super happy doing it, although it was like — I can't tell you the smells. It was horrible.

And everybody was really happy with the results. And as you said, it was a very successful campaign, like it reached global, you know, like global publications. People were talking about it, which opened the conversation again. And that was really the purpose behind it. Obviously, a lot of people got really upset with it because they were like, "Oh, you're showing the bad side of Lebanon, no." And for me, like, I don't believe in hiding behind somebody's finger. You know, like, tell the things as it is, instead of portraying a false image about Lebanon just because you want people to think that we're cool and we're fancy and we're, I don't know what. No, let's lobby, let's create pressure, like international pressure, not just local pressure, to actually pressure our corrupt politicians to actually do something. The crisis is not the same as before. It's much, much, much less. But obviously, there's many things that happen. It's not just that campaign. It's not like the campaign solved the entire problem. But it actually was part of the solution.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

You did what you set out to do and you did it remarkably. And it's not just about the photo shoots. It's about your work itself. It's the fashion. You know, Garbage Mountain works because your designs are so arresting and they appear even more arresting against the backdrop of this environmental crisis. You've said that you try to produce sustainable work. And one of the ways that you do this is by using previously used or abandoned textiles. I want to know, what's the greatest length you've gone to get the right piece of fabric?

**RONI HELOU:**

So it started, again, after I came back from London, and back then, I'm someone that is really like my entire process starts with the fabrics. So it's the textures and the fabric that really start everything, start the creative process for me. And I was very upset because at the time like I would get some fabric. I was always using like you know like deadstock fabrics. But like, I would get this fabric and then see another designer using it. After all, Lebanon is a small country, and you know, there isn't that much of like fashion businesses in Lebanon. So it makes sense that a lot of designers would put their hand on the same fabric and do something with it. And that was really upsetting. So I was like, "Okay, I wanted to put my hand on fabric that has a story that is not new. It's vintage or deadstock, and that nobody has access to. How am I going to do it?" And then it hit me that because in Lebanon, especially before the Civil War, we had textile factories. You know, like, we had an actual industry that we completely lost due to the war. So I decided to research in the areas that some people would call "ghetto," you know, like these suppliers that had their places for a long time, maybe like some people, maybe for 60 years. And I actually went there in person and started talking to these people. Most of them were like old men, you know. And I introduced myself and I would ask them about their story. And they have really interesting stories, for example,



like this one guy who used to have this huge store in downtown Beirut and then he lost it after the Civil War. And then that store is the Louis Vuitton store today. And this guy has this very small shop now in Forn El Chebbak in a suburb, an area in the suburbs. So there's like these stories about war and how they lost everything and how they like built, rebuilt things and survived. And that was very inspiring to me. And then at some point I'm like, "OK, I like your fabrics, but do you have any old stock?" He was shocked. He was like, "Why do you want my old stock?" Like, he wouldn't understand, for him, that's like some waste now or some dead stock sitting in the warehouse, considered some sort of loss, you know. And I'm like, "Honestly, I'm interested in that, like I'm interested in old fabrics. I don't want any new fabric." And then he went to his depot and he brought these amazing, amazing, amazing vintage wool — like some of them would date like 40 years back, like Italian fabrics with you know like... You know, when fabrics are vintage, the texture changes a bit. It's different. The colours look more, more old. And I love that vibe, like I can feel the story behind them, without even knowing what the story is. And then funny thing that, I bought the first time and then every week after that the guy started actually going down to his warehouse and look for these old pieces, like rolls of fabric. And he would call me every week be like, "Okay, I found this new fabric. Come for a cup of coffee and let me show you what I have new." And, you know, basically, I created this relationship between myself and the supplier. And it's not a relationship between a designer and a supplier anymore. It's about two people who enjoy each other's company and can benefit each other. And I'm still friends with these people 'til now. Now that I'm in Doha — actually, before coming here five months ago, I asked them to go down to their stock again and get me samples of all the fabrics that they have. And obviously, every time I go to Beirut and I hear about this like new old store, I go and visit them and explain the story. And again, I created this community of small businesses around me that support me and I support them in return.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Roni, before we wrap up, I have to ask you this question. And I could see it hanging in the background of what you're saying, because you bring so much heart and passion to your work. One of the things that's so fascinating about Lebanon is that it is a truly multi-religious, multi faith-society. I think there's very few nations in the world which contend with the presence of so many distinctive spiritual traditions, all in the same place, all engaging with each other constantly and actively. I want to ask about you, what are your spiritual practices? What are the places that you go to keep this heart, this vitality, this care, and this passion alive?

**RONI HELOU:**

To be honest, I'm not a very spiritual person, but I believe that I have a very like, I mean, good heart. I don't know if that's the word. It actually started, when I started rescuing animals. I've always been an animal lover and like a planet, a tree hugger. But when I

started rescuing, you actually, it brings you some sort of a joy, a lot of joy and satisfaction to know that actually you saved a life. And so after I started rescuing, I actually turned vegetarian, then turned vegan. And literally it's that process to me, where I started appreciating every small detail in life. I make sure now when I walk, I don't step on, I don't know, ants. I don't kill mosquitos because for me, okay, I know that they might be buggy and I don't know, they might be annoying. But now, like, as a person I, I think about literally what, what it takes, you know, like the physics and the energy and the time that it took actually to create this organism. And even the fact of them just, I don't know, like flying, you know, like for me, I think about all those details. And this is spirituality for me, you know, like this is what keeps me, it's the appreciation of everything around us. I really appreciate everything around me, like those small microorganisms and the small microprocesses in our systems, microsystems in life, to the like biggest thing. I have a very huge appreciation for them and a huge respect, and I try my best not to affect in any negative way any of that, you know? Anything that surrounds me. And for me, that's my spirituality. When I do that, when I know that I have a guilt-free conscience, you know, I have, I'm feeling very spiritual and, I don't know, I feel alive.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Roni Helou, what is this being human to you?

**RONI HELOU:**

I believe being human is being selfless and being in sync with everything that surrounds us. We are one species on this planet. And one out of I don't know how many billions of species in the entire universe. So it's important that we appreciate the miracle that created us in the first place but also important to know that we are not the gods of this universe. Our miracle is equal to every other miracle of creation that happens on this planet, on that other planet, in that other galaxy. So, when we think of ourselves as just that one other dot in this universe, that's when we become selfless and humane.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Roni Helou, thank you for making the time to speak to me on *This Being Human*. It's been a pleasure.

**RONI HELOU:**

Thank you so much for having me.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:**

*This Being Human* is an Antica production. Our senior producer is Kevin Sexton. Mixing and sound design by Phil Wilson. Our intern is Annie MacLeod. Original music by Boombox Sound. Our executive producer is Lisa Gabriele. Stuart Coxe is the president of Antica Productions. *This Being Human* is generously supported by the Aga Khan

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