

Containing multitudes



Musician and writer René Kladzyk shares her experience as an atypical multi-hyphenate and a working artist with a day job.

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As told to René Kladzyk, 1487 words.

In early 2020, I wrote a guide for TCI on [how to build a better future music industry](#). I didn't know then that my life would soon transform radically, along with my ideas about what it means to foster resilience as a musician.

When the pandemic upended our lives, I cancelled a tour and got a day job as a local reporter. It wasn't that I was no longer a musician. Quite the opposite—that fall I released an album while writing and recording another. But I began the weird tango of adding a new identity to how I exist on the world's stage. I was reporting on ICE detention centers and singing about romance. Would people think I was a phony? Would my new journalism contacts take me seriously when they learned about my alter ego? Would the music industry regard my work as seriously if they knew I had given up on solely trying to earn a living from music?

I lived for nearly a decade as a freelancer and touring musician, and during that time never had health insurance. I had remarkable adventures but no time for actual healthy relationships, always too busy working one of my 10,000 hustles to scrape by. Becoming a reporter was a revelation: a career that could offer the predictable ability to pay rent, and it was still creative! I got to write, serve my community, and sometimes, magnificently, hold power to account. But every time I started having to promote my music in the same breath as talking about my work as a reporter, I became uncomfortable. I was afraid of being seen as inauthentic or, worse, not fully committed to either of my two callings.

In the years that followed, I switched from local reporting to working for a federal government watchdog where I report on the Department of Homeland Security and the Pentagon. (By the way, what I write here solely reflects my own perspective, and not the views of my employer, the Project on Government Oversight.) All the while, I've been writing and performing songs, trying to come to terms with what that means about who I am and how I define myself to others.

Here are some things I've learned about the joys and perils of being an atypical multi-hyphenate, and a working artist with a day job.

One can feed the other.

Institutions that churn out productive young adults, aka high schools and colleges, often espouse a singular and linear notion of "career." It's a model that makes less and less sense in the world of today, particularly for people in creative industries or for those who are blessed with curious minds.

Listen to Bob Dylan and Walt Whitman and Arthur Rimbaud and embrace your multitudes! Then go a step further, and give them space to fuel each other. I've become increasingly aware that my ability to spend hours reporting on deaths in ICE custody is entirely dependent on the hours I dedicate to basking in the splendor of song. And vice versa! Carving out multiple and divergent pathways of expression can help each pathway be more sustainable and

enduring. We need to be able to dive into wormholes and we need to be able to step outside of them and catch a glimpse of the sky.

I'm not going to pretend that the transition between those different pathways doesn't feel extremely awkward at times. I'm writing this essay because it does. And I don't have a pat answer for how to dissolve that feeling. But the reason for the discomfort is baggage from a world that loves to compartmentalize, that encourages us to be discrete and easily comprehensible packages, which is actually not a default way that humans (or any species) operate. The shedding of that baggage is our beautiful duty.

Liberate your art from commerce!

We live in a time of capitalism, and most of us have to earn money to survive. I'm grateful when I earn income from my music. But also, de-coupling my music from my financial survival has been profoundly liberating.

Music is a \$43 billion dollar industry, and, according to a Citigroup study, artists only get about 12% of that massive cash flow. If money were the primary way the work of musicians was valued, understood, and imbued with shared meaning, that percentage would look very different. Defining music's worth by metrics and dollar signs misses the point entirely, and is also an exceptionally bleak way to look at the world.

Music is a fundamental public good, a bottomless wellspring to commune with divine and mysterious forces, and a vital activity in the project of human flourishing. And yes it's also currently treated as a commodity. But if this essay is about anything, it's about how empowering it can be to make choices in the process of defining things, and become comfortable with the both/ands and the grey fuzzy liminal zones.

Ursula Le Guin famously said the divine right of kings once seemed as inescapable as capitalism does now, but people often miss what she said right beforehand: "The profit motive is often in conflict with the aims of art." She believed that resistance and change must begin through art. There is much about the current state of the music industry that is a reflection of the world's toxicities, and one of the holiest tasks of the artist is to upend and disrupt this.

We are the meaning makers.

Most of the time when you're making a creative output—be it a song, a painting, whatever—the process involves self-judgment. Evaluation of whether the work is compelling, worthy of your continued time and energy, worthy of being shared with others. It's a challenging and thrilling step, making the decision to share the fruits of your creative labor with others, believing on some level that they are *needed* in the world. You are making an opportunity for shared meaning, and hopefully expressing something that only you can express, but that can find resonance in the minds and hearts of others. Maybe what you make will help a stranger through a hard time, or soundtrack a baby's birth—you probably will never know! The journey of meaning-making is mysterious and wild and not measurable in numbers but in feelings.

Untethering how you evaluate the work from the idea of your creative labor as a commodity can be transformative. If I were writing and recording music with the primary goal of making money, all my songs would be short, more or less at the same BPM, easily identified as belonging to a proscribed genre, and boring as hell, in my opinion. Thanks to the wonderful work of Liz Pelly, we are abundantly aware of the sort of music that is rewarded and that which is punished and suppressed in a streaming music economy. We don't have to play that game. This world is more vibrant, dynamic, and revolutionary when artists make art outside the bounds of commerce.

Having a separate and predictable source of income does change the terrain for making creative work; it's much easier to be free when you aren't counting on being paid for it. This is not me tacitly accepting a streaming music economy where the work of musicians has been steadily devalued. Rather, it is a practical balancing act to prioritize having the capacity and tools to effectively envision a better future world, and to maneuver the world of today in a way that feels healthy.

I think there is art that the world needs. Some of us are driven by an innate feeling that we have a gift and the ability to share something vital. We are driven by pursuing that aim. I mentioned the idea of a "beautiful duty" before—I didn't make it up; I borrowed it from Borges, who introduced the idea in a poem called "The Thread of the Fable." In it, a thread is placed in the hand of Theseus by Ariadne to aid him in navigating the labyrinth and finding his way back out. "Now we do not even know if what surrounds us is a labyrinth, a secret cosmos, or a haphazard chaos," Borges writes. The thread may be lost—we may be lost—but it is our beautiful duty to continue searching and following that thread, finding our way through the maze.

I like to think of a creative calling in these terms: a way of negotiating the competing imperatives of survival in the modern world while producing bold creative work that feels true and reverberatory. There is no one perfect path, and there is no point of completion. There is acceptance of a perpetual journey and state of seeking, of discovery. For me, the embrace of the multiple is part of that, and is a balm for some of the monsters lurking in corners of the labyrinth. It's a way to pursue that beautiful duty.

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