

On meeting your own standards



Accidental Instagram influencer Ida B. on how to handle a sudden growth in audience, loving what you do every day, and the importance of putting your mental health first.

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3033 words.

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I'm always curious when something that was a "for-fun project" starts growing into something that could be an actual job. Your Instagram feed blew up quickly. For those who don't know, you play and write about a song every day. A lot of people are paying attention to it now... Is it hard to keep it going? Do you allow yourself the space to be like, "You know, I'm not going to do it for a few days?"

I'm a deeply compulsive person, so for now it's not difficult to maintain the momentum. I rarely miss a day because I'm pretty much constantly calling and responding with myself, which I think comes from years of programming a radio show and always spinning my mental wheels, taking in external stimuli or music that comes up in conversation. It's all just loops.

I don't really feel any obligation to my audience, to be entirely honest with you. The moment posting ceases to become pleasurable or interesting to me, or on days that I wake up and I'm like, "I don't fucking want to today," I'm not going to force myself. But the broad majority of my life revolves around music, so I do find myself posting frequently. My followers have been very generous in their praise and recently with their wallets to help me build out a home studio so I can get back to doing what I love most (producing long-form programming and mixes.)

I've received an astonishing amount of physical media at this point, which is an enormous perk—a great deal of it is coming from the pockets I'm most enamored with, which are experimental, improvisational music, disappearing mediums, off the beaten path and left field music.

Radio is non-commercial and that has tremendously informed my ethos around media and music in particular. I just feel like it's something that belongs to everyone, so being a volunteer radio programmer for seven years also really hammered in the ethos that guides my content. Once you're being payrolled by an entity or an individual, something shifts.

Do you find certain kinds of songs or genres perform better? Or are people just generally excited about your curating?

Different people are excited by different songs, I find. I like to think that there's something for everyone in my feed. Sometimes I'm surprised at the things that will gain traction really broadly. I don't know if this is something that comes down to individual preference, or if it's something that is manufactured by these platforms and the algorithms, but I have noticed that music that can't really credibly be categorized as "deep cuts," but is perceived that way, is often what takes off. I feel that this speaks to the exoticization that has occurred inside of the American cultural collective consciousness, and I find it to be a bit upsetting.

A perfect example: there was a video I made about a Hindi singer, this very, very prominent, prolific musician in India, Asha Bhosle, who's like the Elvis of India in terms of notoriety. She is incredibly prolific, an incredibly well known mega superstar, but the accusations of "deep cut" just came flying in and unfortunately there's a way that a colonial mindset is engineered into [how] these platforms work. The word "discovery" is something I think about a lot. It's just funny to think that you're discovering something that was already there long before you with a life of its own. It's like, you didn't really discover it, it arrived, and you have to be astute enough to notice in the moment as with any kind of music.

The "discovery" thing is something I was talking to someone about recently, it's one of those buzzwords that's keyed on so much, especially online. It's like Christopher Columbus, but for music.

I don't know when they implemented it, but in the earlier days of Spotify they had these playlists that were literally called Spotify Discover. It's interesting to have something spoon-fed to you and then to call it Discovery. It's very odd to me.

Speaking of algorithms, when did you notice that things were picking up?

January 12th (less than 4 months ago!) was the day that it became really clear. I remember because a very, very dear friend of mine got diagnosed with cancer pretty much exactly when shit popped off. And it was so rapid. Or at least at the time, my sense of scale was such that like a couple of thousand people following me in one day was insane. I was not prepared for what would come after that. That was at the 27,000th follower mark and I'm not going to name names, but at that point in time, some musical celebrities that I consider to be enormous and globally known followed me, which was completely flabbergasting. And, at the time, it was quite stressful to just be regarded, to be seen, on that scale. The horror of being perceived.

It's often the unexpected, unplanned for project that blows up. To me, what's satisfying about your feed, and with others, too, is there's a consistency to it. I'm a sucker for a basic, consistent format. That's essentially what I set out to do with TCI.

I think anyone that studies algorithms, and at this point the archetypal influencer, will tell you that the hottest commodities are authenticity, consistency, and in my case, I'm painfully earnest and in a strange way that's really served me. The consistency is not hard to maintain and the moment it becomes difficult to maintain, it won't be.

I've seen you engage politically. Do you get any haters now that there's a broader audience?

My perspective is that the internet is an echo chamber. It's incredibly divisive and generally useless to attempt to wield a platform like Instagram for any immediate political gain. When the war popped off, I spoke out about Iran and chose to suspend making videos for one week, which was really what it was proposed as—I was incredibly disturbed that there appeared to be a broad media blackout within the United States and wanted my followers to shift their attention. Through pretty much [only] one independent journalist I was seeing unbelievable scenes of destruction. At the time I was like, "I have a huge audience, something as basic as pointing them to Democracy Now might increase attention" And though, in my view, [Democracy Now] is the most pedestrian middle-of-the-road reporting, to some people it might be very independent reporting.

There were some people who responded calling it a virtue signal. Regardless of my intention, it did feel misaligned and uncomfortable for me to be producing content at that moment because my mind and heart was very disturbed by what was happening, and I was just like, I don't want to be looking at my phone six hours a day right now and certainly didn't want to be posting or making content.

With regards to haters, I've thought a lot about this concept of Dead Internet Theory. There's a podcast called Kill The Computer, I think that was where I first heard this idea, but Dead Internet Theory the notion that the broad majority of people and accounts you interact with on social media platforms these days are not people, are artificially generated. They're actual bots, or people in bot farms, whose entire job is to troll all day and churn out all manner of atrocious, violent harassment. I've definitely encountered plenty of those.

If there is something that seems like good faith criticism and I can ascertain with relative ease that it's a real person, I will occasionally engage in good faith, but for the most part it's a lot of really disgusting shit. At first I was deeply triggered and horrified. It's very bizarre to have started to understand that the way that it feels triggering and violating, is actually a response [these bots] desire [to manufacture].

What's really psychologically disturbing is the fact that any feminine person in public facing fields has to do this spiritual lobotomizing, where you make a choice to attempt to let something—that is ultimately quite violent—just be water off the duck's back. I'm still figuring that part out.

Do you imagine expanding beyond Instagram or is the format essential for what you do?

I don't really care about expanding my "brand" though I do want to expand my "content" to doing what I did on the radio—producing long-form shows. I don't really have an interest in expanding further than that, to be entirely honest with you. I'm relatively obscured behind a screen and keeping it simple. That's my preference.

Sure, I have all sorts of philosophical thoughts about music. I love to talk to people in my community about music, but not necessarily to a hundred thousand people. And with regards to expansion, I don't think I have a consumer mentality necessarily.

So for me, the goal is to be able to continue doing what I do regardless of the scale. If the audience grows, so be it. If it shrinks, so be it. I just want to make sure that long form programming is something that remains a priority and that I continuously find a way to incorporate into my life. What I'm doing on the internet and the success I've received is completely the result of my radio practice and how deeply established in me and in my feed post it is.

I have been astonished at the number of people that I admire who regard me as a peer right now. It feel[s] like it's broadened my community of people who are into "music that sounds like shit" which is my favorite kind. I do also have a pretty global following, which I never would have anticipated. I'm a third culture kid and grew up abroad. I moved to the United States when I was eight years old and there's something about the number of people from the world over who have shown up that is really moving to me.

The things that keep me in it don't really correspond, I guess, with anything that "grows the platform." What I do as it currently exists provides something very nourishing to me. As someone who's a very community oriented person, the more off-the-beaten-path songs that I share deserve to be archivally preserved in some way, even if only through oral history. Even if only through in-person physical environments or physical media or whatever it might be. More so than expansion or anything like that, keeping that music alive and in the public eye is a really big part of what has made this all feel aligned for me.

It's good it exists. Some music is harder to find—it came before the internet and for whatever reason it was never was archived. Preserving those histories is important. Some people only rely on the algorithm, and they're clearly missing a lot. So, yeah, it's a service, a public service. You're educating people, too. That seems valuable to me.

It's weird to think of an Instagram page as an archive, but here we are. Sometimes I worry it's an echo chamber, though there's plenty of people who're just like, "I've never heard of this. Thank you so much." A lot of the folks who engage are heads who are already familiar with what I'm sharing. Whether it comes from either contingent, the thing that means the most to me, Brandon, the comment that never fails to put a smile on my face, is when people say that I "know ball" and for whatever reason that just really warms my cold little heart. I find it funny and sweet. So, I guess to some what I'm doing is valuable.

As for the algorithm, for me the process of finding and sharing is the practice for me. Digging is where the ecstasy of it all comes in. And the woo woo, the spiritual. The spooky things that coalesce. It's the opposite of an algorithm, but it kind of functions the same way, where things come to me, delivered to me through mystical means or means that are obscured beyond what you can really see. I do like to think that even the idle scrollers find their way to me and can pick and choose what they like and what they don't from there.

To you, what is a successful day? I guess it may already feel successful in that you're doing the thing you enjoy doing and people are paying attention. But do you have days where you're just like, "This one was great" and maybe other days you where you think, "That was less than great"?

I think I'm successful in what I do every day because I love music and I get to share it—it's a privilege. I never feel bad about a video I make, in part because it's quite simple and brief, but also because I know my own heart, I know what my relationship to the thing is and I'm very confident and secure inside my relationship to music. Success is a funny word, perhaps valuable is better. As I mentioned before, the physical media I receive is a true gift and feels like a true privilege. Because so much of it is off the beaten path and archival, I just feel so fortunate and I suppose for me that means successful. For someone who loves music as much as I do, it's a beautiful way to receive new things to listen to from other people who resonate with whatever it is I do.

The things that really feels like success to me is when I make videos about people in my immediate community or artists who are pretty small—or certainly not household names by any stretch of the imagination—and there's a good response to them. I just needed to show 100,000 people at a time! Shout-out, Nine Dog Dick, best grindcore free jazz band in the world. They're my neighbors and I made a video about them, and they ended up selling a few records.

A few other artists and small imprints have expressed the same, that they made some sales from my videos. Any material gain for these artists that I love is probably the truest variety of success in what I do. So many artists live in poverty and are exploited and diminished by the current state of things, and any material gain for them that stems from me sharing their music is really important to me.

There's definitely been a shift. We're in a different era now. Reviews in standard publications no longer move the needle as much as you'd think. I've seen it first hand. People trust individuals, more than ever. There's value in having a curator, one that you know and trust, featuring smaller artists.

Totally. I think it's because any kind of musical commons has been pretty flattened and collapsed in America, and in an era where our ability to connect in a room together becomes more and more suspended. We're living in an era where National Endowment for the Arts funding has been pulled from every entity imaginable. Public radio has been defunded, public broadcasting has been defunded, culture mags and music mags are having to all go online and can't afford to publish anymore. So, here's where Instagram and TikTok come in.

Before this happened to me, as a musician myself, I would always be griping and resentful, saying things like "All of us need to get off of these platforms. We need to go back to posting show flyers in the Signal chat. Fuck this shit. I hate this, why are we all self-advertising on here?"

From where I am now, I've come to understand that Instagram in particular is the premier platform for musicians to announce their record releases, announce their singles, signal boost the shows their playing, the tours they're doing. Everyone relies heavily on Instagram, specifically, I think. Even people as notable on a more indie scale as Geese, for example, rely to some extent on social media. I've been very fortunate to play with some incredibly gifted musicians who have had to interface with labels and managers that have insisted that artists *have* to post this many times a week, they have to self-promote, they have to turn themselves into content. More than anyone else, I would say mid-tier to small artists because we live in an era where broad pop music as we know it does not exist and smaller artists don't expect to really ascend like that. The only tier of pop music left is this top one percent, your Chappell Roans, your Drake, whoever with a small number of emerging artists coming out on that scale

That's been really interesting to observe. I just did not understand the extent to which Instagram is necessary for musicians these days. It's almost like Instagram is doing the thing people once relied on labels to do—promotion, you might get a paid partnership, you might find a way to monetize. It goes viral on TikTok, that's the real dream, you get some scratch. You get a shitload of exposure.

Based on my own experience as a curator, I think there's a lot to be said for not having an ulterior motive with regards to fame or "making it." If the only thing you really give a shit about is the thing that you're doing and

being able to do it in a way that meets your own standards, weirdly, I guess that's the key to success. It seems to be working out pretty well for anyone who's going that route, apparently myself included.

Ida B recommends:

listen to yr local non-commercial radio station

listen to a whole album uninterrupted, front to back

experiment with deep listening

abandon streaming, return to physical media, & dig for it. make it fun

ask yr friends what they're listening to & check it out

Name

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Vocation

influencer, curator

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