

On sharing every side of your creative self



Actor, author, and musician Michael Imperioli (*The Sopranos*, *Goodfellas*) discusses the importance of exploring every authentic facet of creativity no matter the medium and the importance of honoring your inspirations.

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As told to Lior Phillips, 2986 words.

Tags: [Acting](#), [Writing](#), [Music](#), [Podcasts](#), [Collaboration](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Independence](#).

What has been the most surprising thing you've encountered along your creative path?

It's been really surprising, particularly in the last couple of years, that the *Sopranos* found a young audience. I became aware of it three years ago, on the 20th anniversary of the first broadcast, and it's been really wonderful. There's this younger audience of late teens, 20s, and early 30s who were too young to have seen the show when it first was on the air. That's allowed me to reach a younger audience through the stuff that I'm doing, either with the podcast, music, TV, movies, or social media. I learn a lot from young people and how they see the world.

My youngest is 20. They're adults, they're not even kids anymore, I have a 20-year-old, a 24-year-old, and a 31-year-old. And their generations were a lot more open-minded and a lot more aware of what was going on for real in the world. I didn't expect to connect to a younger audience at this point in my life, so that's been really surprising and very, very pleasing.

Binging the *Sopranos* again almost seemed like a rite of passage during the pandemic. Was your podcast, *Talking Sopranos*, something that you'd been planning on prior to the pandemic? What inspired you to want to return to that world in this way?

I agree 100%. We were going to do the podcast in March of 2020, before the pandemic hit. We got approached in the fall of 2019 by three different producers. Neither Steve [Schirripa] nor I really listened to podcasts. It wasn't our idea, but then we started thinking, "Well, maybe this could be cool." One of the producers was somebody that Steve knew, and he said we could do it independently rather than use a company, which we chose to do, so we could have creative control over it.

It was fun being back into the *Soprano* world while people were binging it again—under horrible circumstances nonetheless because it was quarantine. But yet they were watching it and it was a diversion from the anxiety and uncertainty of those times. It was fun being back in the center of that because I hadn't really watched the show since it aired. It was off the air for a long time. It wasn't this zeitgeist thing until the pandemic, and we'd already planned on starting the podcast. It was fun to be in the midst of that.

That ethos of creative control ties into your history in producing theater and in punk music. It's not surprising that would be a prerequisite for a new project.

I started producing theater in my early 20s, which was right around when I started working in independent film. I did a lot of independent film and produced theater and worked in music, and all that stuff was independent. And then my wife and I built a theater in 2004 to produce new plays. So a lot of my life was going back and forth: I did a big comedy that was not very good so we could build a theater.

I resisted social media for a long time, and then towards the end of 2019 I was on a network TV show for NBC and there was a woman helping the actors make social media accounts. She said it would help the show. I started thinking about all this independent stuff that I do, and thought [social media] can promote that.

If I had had Instagram when we had the theater I'd probably sell out every show. When the band first got together in 2006, sometimes it wouldn't be easy to get people to shows. Putting up posters in downtown New York doesn't guarantee a sellout. But since we started performing again, we get good attendance through Instagram because you're tapping directly into people who are interested in what you're doing, and they're learning more about how you see the world. They can relate to those things if it's something they appreciate. I was kind of stupid. I thought everyone knew everything about me and they didn't— especially fans of *the Sopranos*. You figure they know all about your politics, how you see the world, your history, the things you've done, and the truth was they didn't. So getting on social media really allowed people to see, "Oh, he's into this type of music? So am I. Maybe I'll listen to his band."

The intersecting ideas of celebrity and character are really fascinating. You had the ability because of your talent to play this character so close to the bone that people might react to that persona when they see you. The cult fan base built by the *Sopranos* came early in the prestige television boom, before peak social media, when there could be that obsession over character without it dipping as fully into the minutiae of the actor. You've developed that more personal connection more organically over the years as you've shown more sides of your creative self.

I think you're right. Organic is a good word because when I started on social media, I said, "Okay, what are you actually going to do?" I started looking at what some other people were doing and I'm like, "I'm not going to be filming myself having lunch." People can do whatever they want, but I was trying to figure out what I was going to post. Then I thought, "Just start turning people onto stuff that you're passionate about, be it other artists and music and Buddhism."

And what came out of that was this weekly meditation class that's now been going on for over a year and a half that I led on Instagram. I was posting stuff about Buddhism and people would message me during the pandemic and say, "How do I meditate?" And I would message people back and give them instructions. It started happening a lot because people were so stressed. They were looking for ways to alleviate all that. I thought I should make a video and then just send people to the video instead of writing instructions. I tried to do an Instagram Live and that was a disaster, but somebody wrote to me and offered to help. Now we work very closely together.

Does that trusting collaborative relationship play into the short film that you made to accompany your band Zopa's "Diamonds Into Dust"?

Yeah. During the pandemic, this Scottish filmmaker James Price found our music on Bandcamp before we were on Spotify. He wrote to me on Instagram and said, "I love this album, and I love this specific song. I'm a filmmaker in Scotland. I have my own crew and group of actors and I want to make a video for you." I told him, "It's a pandemic, nobody is working. I don't really have a budget." He goes, "You don't need a budget. I'll do it." And he went ahead and made this video for the band. My friend who helped with the meditation webinars did a virtual premier with the filmmaker in Scotland and the band here in New York. People signed up and watched this premier online and then did a Q&A. It was amazing.

James and I have never met, but it went really well and I would work with him again in a minute. It was just a pleasure to work with him and get to know him a little bit. Social media has been amazing in that respect. In many ways it's changed my life in a lot of good ways. I started meeting other musicians through social media, so when we had our first several concerts, there were several indie bands that I was already communicating with that we wound up doing shows with. Again, these were people I had never met, but I knew we shared certain aesthetics

and musical tastes and have become friends. I know there's a lot of downside to social media and I'm very well aware of the addiction to it, but there's also a way to use it in a positive way.

Actors as much as any other creatives have to learn what it takes to work with other people. Is there anything particular that you learned in that collaborative realm that has helped you in other creative practices, like writing a novel?

In some ways collaboration has been how I developed as an artist. I didn't go to a conservatory or college or anything like that, but I did go to an acting class where I met people, some of whom I still work with today. That's how you learn and grow as an artist. Writing the novel I would say was the least collaborative thing that I've done, yet at the heart of the novel was somebody that I knew—which was Lou Reed, who I knew in the last 10 years of his life. So in some sense, there was a collaboration with him because he inspired me. His life inspired me and his work inspired me, and those three years on and off when I was writing that book, I was spending time with him in my head. So in essence, that was a collaboration too.

I like to give praise to people that I admire, people who I feel deserve a bigger audience, people that I've been inspired by. Sometimes I'll post a picture of somebody on social media and everyone thinks they're dead because most people don't really praise other artists, they just mourn them and eulogize them. But the time to praise them is now. I like to promote people, praise them now because they know that their work has touched people. It's important for artists to know that, and it's important to turn other people onto people who have inspired you.

Does that level of sharing and encouragement run into any danger of blurring the line into something ego-based? Does your relationship with your own ego stand separately? I suppose at the core you were always having to harness your own ego even before being so firmly in the public eye, so some forihbuvm of that had to come down to confidence. Confidence in the ego.

It's a fine line. If you could be honest with it and just say, "This song you wrote really touched me, there's something very real about it," people need to hear that. Not just like, "you're amazing," or, "you're beautiful." Just say, "This touched me. This got through, what you tried to do." When you have confidence as an artist, and it's healthy, you take chances, which is good.

How did you find that confidence?

Early in my career, there were a lot of things where I didn't have encouragement from people. When I look back, the few people that actually did encourage me were really, really, really important. When you're starting out, you're very vulnerable. It's very hard to get anywhere in anything artistic. The odds are so against you, you're broke all the time, you've got to work other jobs. And when you do have people that you respect believe in you, it's a big thing. It takes a certain generosity to do that and artists are often not generous.

That's troubling, but I understand it in a sense because it's so demanding to put yourself out there with that level of vulnerability. What did you do when you had those moments of doubt, when you weren't being encouraged or when you were stuck within yourself?

I wasted a lot of time. It's hard to say what would've happened differently, and things take time to ripen, obviously, and I understand all that. But I've made a decision in my life that if somebody's work touches and inspires me, that I'd like to tell them that.

Outside of that encouragement, do the resources that you need differ from project to project? When you were writing your novel did you need to go to a different location than you normally would to prepare for a role, for example? Did you need different inspiration for your music than you do for writing?

Writing a novel really takes a lot of regular intervals of time and discipline. You need a space where you're not going to be interrupted at all. When I wrote the book, I actually had an office that I rented for a couple of years in California. Now I'm living in New York and there's a library that I belong to that's wonderful and has a

lot of private and semi-private spaces. But it's just a really focused place to work. Writing fiction, even screenwriting, there's a very specific structure to it, while writing songs is completely haphazard. You just start messing around on some chord progression and you start singing a melody and something comes out and then you'll record it, and then two months later you'll pick it up again. Writing for me is much more structured. A screenplay once you make the movie or the TV show, the screenplay's nothing, you know what I mean, it's a schematic, it's not a finished work of art. With the novel all you have are the words, the sentences, that's it, there's nothing else. I'm working on a new novel and it's all handwritten first draft and I know where everything is. I know which notebooks everything is in. But my lyric kind of notebooks for music is a mess. It's the only section of my work life that's a mess.

You've been in no wave bands and spent time in the punk scene, all of which emphasizes authenticity. When you're on stage with Zopa, do you think of yourself as being in character? Is it Michael? Is it drawn from different parts of your life?

This is probably going to sound really corny, but when I'm performing music with Zopa, I feel like that's closest to who I am more than any character as an actor. Maybe writing the novel is close, but it's words, not me on a stage. It's a different closeness. But being on stage performing music is the closest to who I am. It's not the fact that I'm playing it, it's the content and what it means to me, the sounds that we're making, the words that we're saying, and how we're performing it.

Music is very abstract, in a lot of ways. The vibrations we're making are very personal and very in tune with who I am as a person. Performing it, there's no director telling you you have to do this louder or whatever. It's just you. You can be as emotional as you want, or you cannot be emotional. You can express as much as you want, or you can hold back as much as you want. It's like acting in that there's a lot of emotion connected to it and there's a lot of communication, yet it's just us. There's no producer, there's no director, there's no screenwriter, there's no studio, there's no network. It's just Elijah, me, and Olmo on stage, very, very independent and very personal.

A friend of mine who's an actor asked me, "Is it more like theater?" I said, "It's like theater except people are yelling shit at you." There's no boundary between the players and the audience like there is in theater, where everybody's quiet and lets you just do your thing. A rock and roll show is way, way, way more interactive, as it should be, and you feed off stuff. You know if they're liking what you're doing.

The other point of comparison is that with music you can record something at home and then put it in front of people, whereas there's a lot of red tape in Hollywood. It seems strange to compare the two because each can have so many different facets, but I do think that it's important to compare in this context.

It is important. I compare them all the time. Literature is a love of mine and is something that is a big part of my life, but the idea to start a novel came out of frustration with projects that I had initiated and was writing mostly for TV that I couldn't get made, or projects that got to some point and then there was a producer or a studio exec who was just not in the right place for it. I just got so frustrated, like, "I just want to do something myself." Obviously, I have to get a publisher, but they're not coming in and rewriting the book. I didn't have to get a studio, I didn't have to get a director, I didn't have to get other actors. The book was the end in itself, these words on a page. Although we are in the process of adapting it into a movie. We have a producer who's very interested but wants to read the screenplay.

I didn't write it with the idea of making a movie from it. That wasn't the point. After it was released, I did a lot of live readings of it, particularly in nightclubs, some of the time with Lydia Lunch on her Verbal Burlesque Tour. I would act out parts of the book, sometimes with other actors, and it just came alive. So a lot of people were like, "Why don't you make this into a movie?" I kept hearing that over and over again.

Michael Imperioli Recommends:

Earthworks: poems by Sandra Hochman

Parallel Mothers: film by Almodóvar

Nina Simone's Gum: A memoir by Warren Ellis

IG pages of Africa Brooke and Clementine Morrigan

Call Me Cassandra: A novel by Marcial Gala

Mona: A novel by Pola Oloixarac

Name

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Vocation

actor, writer, director, musician

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Ben Gabbe