On managing your creative time



An interview with musician Alicia Bognanno

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2053 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Inspiration, Focus.

People often say your music reminds them of grunge, or the ’90s, or vintage Sub Pop. When you’re creating work, and people are referencing things from other eras and bands, does it get in the way of the creative process?

When I’m writing, I try to steer away from it. It’s something I didn’t think about before, when I was writing the first record, and before that record was released. The comparisons used to drive me a little bit crazy, because I was born in 1990. Like, I clearly didn’t grow up with Nirvana! I was aware of them based on their hits on the radio. I didn’t experience that scene firsthand, and it wasn’t a huge thing in my life when I was younger. I do understand that a lot of the bands I like came out of that era, but I didn’t think of them as specifically ’90s bands. I thought of them as bands I loved.

But I try and put a positive spin on it in thinking, “Well, we’re going to be categorized. If that’s where we’re going to be categorized, then I’m happy with it.” I’d rather be there than the other things people say. “Garage rock.” We’re not a garage rock band. “Punk rock.” I don’t think we’re much of a punk band either.

I try to not think about it too much. I know people have to find a category to put the music in so they can talk about it. I try not to let it affect my creative process, but it is in the back of my head, and it’s something I’m aware of now that it’s been repeated so many times.

When you’re writing, how do you block that stuff out so you can focus?

I write out of my house. I have a small music room. We practice there as well. For this record, I would be in there every day from nine to five, or whatever. Making work hours helps because it leaves less time to procrastinate and you can ignore the little things that pop into your head. You can brush those off and say, “These are my hours that I set aside to write.”

It gets to a point where it *is* your job, so you do need to treat it professionally. I know that sounds a little bit commercial, but you need to cut out time and make sure you’re doing it. Sometimes you sit down to write and you don’t feel like you’re coming up with anything good or you’re not coming up with anything at all, but at least your brain is moving.

If I get really stuck on lyrics to the point where I feel like I should put my guitar down and stop, I’ll write stuff down knowing that I’m going to go rewrite it and redraft it, forcing my brain to work and to churn out something, even though I know I’m not going to keep it. Just to keep it in practice.

And I don’t bring my phone in the room with me. I don’t bring my laptop in the room with me, and I put everything on silent so that I’m not getting the emails that are going to distract me or text messages or anything like that. I definitely put all electronics away.

I definitely have to have things silenced and in another room when writing music. It’s the same when I’m writing lyrics. This is going to sound so stupid, but I’ll sit in there with my eyes closed and focus on what I’m doing because if you’re not 120% there when you’re trying to write lyrics, there’s no point because you’re just writing down blurbs or abstract things that aren’t making sense. That’s even more of a particular mind frame than I have to be in when just sitting down to play guitar.

Is it sort of like meditation?

It is a bit of a meditative thing. It takes a lot to force myself to focus that much on something, I guess. Maybe it’s because I can get distracted easily. But, yeah, I would say it’s a little bit of meditation, because I have to sit there and tell myself what it’s going to be about before I start writing anything down.

I’ll start writing a song, and a lot of times a word will come with a riff. I’ll see if that was for any particular reason, or if

there’s anything behind it, and then I’ll work on a melody. After that’s done, when I’m really sitting down to write lyrics, I have to think: “What is this song going to be about? How is it going to make sense to you? What order do you want to put it in?”

All that kind of stuff.

When it come to creative blocks, it sounds like you just push through.

I do push through. I didn’t start that way. For the first record, I was juggling three different jobs while trying to write it, so it was a different situation. I would be more like, “Oh, it’s a feeling. You have to feel it and if I’m not feeling it, I can’t do it.” Now that it’s turned into a full-time job, I started treating it that way and learned to push through those things.

I think that if you just shut it down immediately, you could get into the habit of that, and then it’s a mental war. You’re constantly kind of like, “Can I really not write something or is there something else in the back of my mind that I would rather be doing right now?”

Because, if that is the case, then that’s not a legitimate argument for me to put down my guitar. For me, the more space I have between writing, the more paranoid and worried I get that I’m not going to be able to do it or that I don’t have it anymore. It’s important for me to push through that and to make sure that I’m working on something all the time. Even if I know it’s not going to be recorded or used for anything, at least I’m still writing and finding joy in playing guitar.

Can it be difficult writing an recording where you live? Do you sometimes need to go somewhere else to get things done?

I feel like there are benefits to both. I’ve been in this house for almost two years—we practice in it, I write in it, I record basic demos in it. A lot of the times it will be about five or six and I wouldn’t have left my house. I feel kind of gross, like I need to get out. So a lot of times, even if I’m sitting down and doing email, or if I have a couple hours where I have to do more Bully work, I’ll just leave. When I was mapping out the session for the last record, I left. I went to a coffee shop down the street and I brought all my notebooks with me.

The place I lived in before this was an apartment. I had a bunch of roommates, so I had a separate practice space for Bully. There’s a lack of practice spaces in Nashville, which is mind-blowing. I feel like anyone could open one and their business would be thriving. I mean there’s two practice spaces that are affordable, around $400 a month, and then you can split it, if you need to, with another band. There’s a giant wait list for all of them.

The space I had wasn’t soundproofed very well. I’d go into write, and would have all my stuff together and I’d be ready to work for the day, and then someone would come in an hour later and start playing drums in the room next to me, and it would throw everything off. That was my motivation behind deciding I needed to find a place where I could write and where we could practice.

I really can’t tell whether or not it’s better to do it in your house or to move outside of it. I think if, ideally, you could just rent another space that’s perfect for you and have all your gear there and 24-hour access and it’s comfortable and safe, then you would do that. But the easiest financial situation is just to have it all in one place.

Like you said earlier, being in a band is your full-time job now. Does that make it harder?

It’s something I’ve been thinking about a lot. There are a lot of non-music things attached to being a full-time musician. For instance, the way social media plays a role in bands in 2018, and if you do want to do a band as a job, your responsibility towards that kind of thing. I think that side of things plays a way bigger role in being turned off by playing music than the actual duty of playing music does. It’s a bummer.

I was thinking about this the other day. I’m like, “What if you just went into your third record cycle telling everybody that you were done playing music, so that you could just do it without the responsibility to anybody else?” If you could really just do it, not thinking about a deadline or when a release date is, or what song is going to be the single. How much would that change the project?

I think it really depends on the person and the artist, but for me, as much as I want to be like, “Oh, I’m above that” or “that stuff doesn’t affect me” or “I don’t give a shit,” it does. Releasing a piece of music and then having a bunch of people’s opinions jotted down on comments sections everywhere is a bummer. I don’t think that it helps much, as far as being inspired on the musical side of things.

It’s like everyone feels like they own your music, for some reason, like they’re so entitled to it. I don’t know how I really feel about that because, in a way, if you’re creating music and you’re selling it, I guess they kind of do. I’ll find myself just wanting to post a picture of my dog and I’ll be like, “Wait, is there something wrong with this? Is there something wrong that I’m doing here?” It’s insane, and then I tell myself that’s insane, and if I can’t just do what I want to do, then what’s the point?

Because that’s not a great way to live, but I do have arguments like that with myself all the time.

I would just say, overall, I don’t think doing it full-time makes it harder, but I do think you learn to appreciate the times when you’re truly feeling inspired and know that you need to drop everything to sit down and write because you never really know when that feeling is going to come around again.

With album cycles and tours and social media, and all that goes with being a full-time musician, how do you avoid burning out?

That’s why I schedule out hours to work. I know that if I’m working during those hours, then I can have that night to myself to exercise or watch a TV show or read a book or whatever. That’s a difficult thing because you want the record to do well and you have your management and your publicist and the label working to get you press opportunities… I don’t really know how to go about being like, “I’m just not going to do this today,” because in the end, they’re all doing it so your record does well. It’d be weird to just pull the plug. But, with the songwriting process, it’s really important because you don’t want to burn out. You don’t want to feel like you don’t enjoy playing music.

Alicia Bognanno recommends:

Libby’s Dad by Eleanor Davis

Chungking Express by Wong Kar-wai

Walking (my dog) Mezzi

History Revisionist by Malcom Gladwell

2 Dope Queens

Name
Alicia Bognanno

Vocation
Musician



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