

On doing what makes you feel most like yourself



Composer and producer Kelly Moran discusses the allure of perfection, allowing yourself to feel your feelings, and communicating your creative impulses honestly.

May 29, 2024 -

As told to Sam Sodomsky, 2123 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Money](#), [Collaboration](#), [Success](#), [Mental health](#), [Education](#).

On your new record, *Moves in the Field*, you play a Yamaha Disklavier, which allows you to program melodies into the piano and play along with yourself. With such an infinite range of possibilities, how did you find your own voice with the instrument?

I just spiraled deeply. The more I worked with the instrument, the more I realized, even though I can make it do all these inhuman things, it sounds best when I'm just playing and merging things seamlessly. I feel like I've spent almost 10,000 hours on this instrument alone, just scaling the dynamics and listening. It's made me a really sensitive and focused composer. It's hard with this piano because you have so much control. I had to almost forcibly tell myself when I was done. It's like a piece of clay that I could just keep sculpting and improving forever. But there comes a point when only you are noticing the improvements. So you have to find that satisfaction. I was like, "It's time to just trust my intuition and let it go."

Once you worked past the novelty of the instrument, what did you notice about the music you were making? Despite the complex mechanics behind it, it feels very organic and immediate.

During the initial sessions, I recorded each part separately so I could have more control over everything. Sometimes when you reach that level of perfection, it starts to not sound human anymore. It was just missing that heart. I felt like a megalomaniac. I was like, "Oh, I can have every part spatialized perfectly and you're going to hear every single note I wrote. Everything will have its perfect place and it will be designed perfectly." And it *did* have that, but I felt like it was missing the messiness of a human performance—or some kind of cohesion. That was one way of working with the instrument, but it actually sounds best when I can blend and merge everything and it's all resonating simultaneously. I think that is the real beauty of the instrument. Yes, the perfection is cool. But what is so unique about it is that it truly allows you to push the sonic limit of the piano. That was a big realization for me. There was the allure of perfection, and then I had to destroy it and messy it up again.

In addition to your solo music, you have a rich collaborative history. What did you learn from playing in bands?

God, I immediately thought of the dumbest thing, which now I feel like I should say. When I was in the no-wave band Cellular Chaos with Weasel Walter, he was like "Do whatever the fuck you want on stage—just remember to keep your mouth closed. Because if they're taking photos, it's gonna look bad!" So that's one thing I'm conscious of. But more seriously, I think I just learned how to become more confident. I was in that band with three much older, seminal musicians from the New York downtown. There was Marc Edwards, who played with Cecil Taylor. Weasel Walter was a really iconic avant-garde jazz drummer in a million bands. And then Admiral Gray was our singer, who was

like this theater girl. They had all been in a million bands and toured everywhere. They were all living that authentic New York artist life where they were just touring in a van and working a million random odd jobs. They were all so scrappy but so dedicated and passionate. When I first saw them perform, my first thought was: "I want to be in that band because those people are having more fun than I've ever seen people have on stage." They would really go insane. Weasel would wear these giant gauntlets on his arm that would shred the paint off of his guitar. Their level of performance was just so theatrical, and I had to match it. In college I had been much more reserved, so I allowed myself to completely let loose. I became comfortable with commanding a stage.

Despite your penchant for collaboration, most of your solo work is created in isolation. What led you to that process?

I'm a really stubborn, controlling person when it comes to music. Also I know it's not like this now, but when I was growing up, I remember feeling like there weren't a lot of female producers. I remember reading an interview with Björk and she talked about this struggle as a woman producer. People thought that someone helped her with her music, like some guy was helping her record it. When I went to college in my electronic music major, there were 80 guys and two women. I felt very early on that I was gonna be underestimated or viewed as not being as skilled, especially in the studio. So I made this stubborn decision where I was like, "I don't want anyone to help me with my music. I'm going to do everything." I didn't want someone else getting credit. That major had a really big impact on me. I remember feeling so othered and being like, I have to work harder for them to take me seriously because I'm already underestimated. I already feel like I'm sticking out, you know? My sophomore year I cut off my hair. I started wearing glasses. I started dressing more conservatively because I wanted to be taken more seriously. And what's nice is that, as I've gotten older, I've allowed myself to go back to looking like myself and not this minimized version. For lack of a better phrase, it has helped me take up more space.

During those periods of uncertainty, what kept you devoted to the piano?

I learned this really cheesy phrase a couple of years ago but I like it. I heard it from listening to this psychic. She would ask people what makes you feel the most like yourself. If you're confused about your life or not sure what to do with your career, you have to ask yourself: What acts that I take part in make me feel the most like myself? And for me, that's playing piano. I feel like I can express myself on piano better than I can express myself in words. I feel completely in control in a way I don't feel anywhere else in my life. Musically and agility-wise, it's something that I'm always improving at. I know with pianists we can be very compulsive and practice for hours and hours a day. But for me, my idea of perfection, it's really just being the best version of myself and being able to communicate my creative intention in a way that feels honest and genuine.

What happens when the thing that makes you feel most like yourself becomes tethered to your livelihood? Do financial pressures affect your relationship to your craft?

My first job that I ever had was being a piano accompanist for a voice teacher in my town. I was 12 years old and I was getting paid \$10 an hour. This kid in my grade, his mom was the teacher and I would go to her house for six hours every Saturday, playing piano for these kids. I just remember being like, "Holy shit, I can make money doing this? Why the fuck would I do anything else in my life?" That moment made me realize that this is all I'm going to focus on.

So very early on, I had this conception of having music tied to my livelihood. It's not an easy path because there's no one way to make money as a musician. But another thing that helped me decouple music and financial incentives was the fact that these voice lessons were also basically therapy sessions for the students. This woman was like a surrogate mom to all of them. They were all kids in my grade or at my school, and I was just sitting at the piano while they would come in and sit on the couch and say things that they couldn't tell their parents. Then they'd get up and start singing and it was like a weight was lifted. It was really empowering for me to see this. Music is an intrinsically healing thing. It's a form of self soothing. So no matter how stressful it can be to have a career in music and to deal with all the bullshit of the industry, I think just the act of making music has always made everything else feel worth it to me. It allows me to not get in my head about being successful or making money. Because that's not why I do it. I do it because it feels good and it makes me happy.

As your work reaches a bigger audience, how do you keep your music feeling like a natural extension of your emotional state and not like productivity?

I think I've realized in the past couple of years that I make the best music when I am allowing myself to really feel my feelings and have that be the focus of what I'm doing. The times when it's hardest for me are when it's like... Last week I had to submit a demo for a commercial. They were using one of my songs as the temp music, and they were like, "Do you want to try to write something a minute-and-a-half long? It needs to be uplifting and sentimental but not too sad." It was so fucking hard to do! I felt like I was losing my mind.

But then to contrast that, the times when it's easiest for me are when I can go deep into what's honestly happening inside of me. I know that sounds weird, but if I can explain, it'll make more sense. Last summer, I had a really, really bad breakup that totally caught me by surprise and just made me so depressed. And I was like, "I can cope with this in one of two ways. I can either, you know, sit in bed and watch TV and eat ice cream and just numb myself." Then the deranged creative part of my brain was like, "Oh, you're really raw right now. This is a good opportunity for you." So I went to the piano and said to myself, "I want to feel these feelings even deeper. I need to get this out." And I feel like I made some of my best music during those sessions. I truly feel that being emotionally in touch with yourself, and just being honest with yourself, is what will yield the best work.

You mentioned writing a song for a commercial. Are there any offers where you would draw the line with your music?

I guess I wouldn't let our government use it. [laughs] I'm not opposed to commercials or things like that. I want to make a living. It's funny, I haven't had an opportunity to sell out yet. I've been pretty fortunate to be able to make things work off what I've been doing.

How did you develop your own definition of success when it comes to your music?

I've always known that there are a million talented pianists in the world. You could probably walk a block in New York and find a better pianist than me. When I was in college studying classical music, I heard someone in the practice room next to me playing the same Brahms sonata—but playing it better than me. It was one of those moments where I was like, "Well, I'm not gonna be the best Brahms Interpreter." But I can be the best interpreter of my music. That's what I strive for.

Kelly Moran Recommends:

A Natural History of the Senses—my all time favorite book. Diane Ackerman dedicates a chapter to each sense, examining them through an anthropological and scientific lens. This book re-ignites all my senses and helps me appreciate my surroundings more deeply every time I read it.

A chocolate-covered almond paired with a ginger chew in the same bite.

Treat yourself to at least one fancy pair of pajamas, or a silk robe to wear when lounging around at home. It's more comfortable than sweats and it really helps to boost morale!

Stan Brakhage's hand painted films.

"Dark Waves" by John Luther Adams. When I first heard this piece, I was blown away by how utterly deep and resonant music for two pianos can be, proving that the only thing better than one piano is two of them!

Name

Kelly Moran

Vocation

composer and producer

□

Brandon Bowen

