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As told to René Kladzyk, 2580 words.

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On abandoning five-year plans

Filmmaker and performer Cricket Arrison discusses separating money from creativity, learning by helping others, and trusting yourself. For readers who are unfamiliar, do you mind giving a quick rundown of what you're working on right now, and some highlights from the world of Cricket?

I'm a filmmaker and a writer, and I'm a performer in what used to be in the world of comedy, but I feel like I'm recovering from that. I started out as a weirdo artist in Baltimore, Maryland, just bopping around that scene. I thought I wanted to be a musician. And then, I did a lot of theater, and then I fell in with a group called Wham City, which was a collective there that started making a lot of film work together. That's how I got sucked into film. My early artistic endeavors were infomercials for Adult Swim: the best known one was probably this thing called Unedited Footage of a Bear, which was a big viral hit when it came out.

Can you tell me more about what you carry with you from the creative community you were part of in Baltimore, now that you live in LA?

I will be forever grateful that I spent 10 years of my life in Baltimore. It's where I learned to be an artist. I never went to art school. It was just this community of people who were like, "What can we do together? What can we do for this place, and for each other?" Because it was so small, there were no boundaries between disciplines. That really helped me as an artist. If you needed to do something, you needed to find people to do it. You weren't like, "Oh well, she's not a musician, so she can't sing in this." It was like, "Oh, you used to be in a choir? Please come sing with me."

What's some of your work that you're really excited about right now?

I'm really excited and proud of these two short films that I wrote and directed and acted in, that have been bopping around the festivals. One of them is called Someday All This Will Be Yours, and I filmed it in my childhood home with a very small crew. I just self-funded it. It's a house tour [by] a haunted, pregnant woman who's talking about the legacy of the things and emotions we offer as inheritances to our children. It's a very weird, decrepit 1970s house. I wanted to document the home that I grew up in, [and thought] that no one would ever see it. It's the most personal thing I've ever made.

I like the idea of a house as a form of self portrait.

Right? Memories are stored in the physical environment. In LA, where I didn't grow up, all of the memories here are the most recent version of me. And then, I go home to my childhood home, and every single doorknob is just laden with who I used to be. It's such a rich space to draw on. I think everybody's childhood home is haunted, so it's kind of about that.

And then, I have another short film right now called Chomp [co-directed with Suki-Rose], that is more explicitly horror, about a news intern who starts biting everyone and stealing their teeth. It's about making violent decisions in order to get ahead, and the things that I've done that I'm not proud of, and also, the self-violence that you have to inflict in order to fit into a system. There's lots of biting, so I'm proud of that, too.

If you could haunt anything or anyone, what would you haunt? Are you haunted by anything?

If I could haunt anything, I think I would haunt the Maine seacoast. It just sounds so romantic. That's

the physical environment in which I think the act of haunting would really fit.

You just like it aesthetically.

I like it aesthetically, and I think, as an actor, the production design really helps me get into a character, so I think I would haunt the Maine sea coast.

Okay, for example, you said that all childhood homes are haunted, but does your childhood home haunt you?

It did until I made this film, and now it doesn't, because I think the film was a spell that I did on my relationship with it. I don't think I'm a particularly haunted person. I'm haunted by things I said to people that came out the wrong way.

I'm haunted by that, and I'm haunted by a sense of the present being in the middle position of such a long line of people in both directions.

So you're haunted by time?

Yes. Oh my god, yeah. I'm haunted by time.

How do you see where you're at in your career, or creative identity, right now? What are some of the things you appreciate about this page in your story?

I think for a long time, because I was really scared to be an artist, I really didn't understand that I had an identity as an individual artist. I did a lot of collaborative work, and I love that model. I think in these last few years, it's maybe the first time that I've allowed myself to understand that I can make work on my own. I am lucky in that I had this soft, lovely launching pad of understanding how to make work with other people and friends. Now, I can take those lessons and trust myself enough to make what I want to make, and not feel like I have to create somebody else's idea, or that I have to run my ideas by someone else. There's a little more trust in myself now.

It's funny, because I'm turning 40 this year, and I don't know—I think this is true of a lot of artists who I talk to—I'm like, "Am I early career? Is this just beginning? Have I had a career? Have I arrived in any way?"

It's always interesting talking to people who have five or 10 year plans. I have never had a brain that could hold space for things like that.

I've done *the Artist's Way*, and it was very helpful to me, and that's controversial. There's a part in that where you have to write out five year goals, and I was like, "Whoa." It never occurred to me that I could be that methodical. During the pandemic, I lost a lot of the traditional career opportunities that had been building up. I had a pilot that was canceled. Any sense that I had of a linear artistic career trajectory went away, and it felt really bad for a little bit. That's when I started being like, "I want to make this film. I can just shoot, nobody can tell me yes or no." Now, I follow instinct, and I'm not sure where it will lead me. Maybe in five years I'll want another five-year plan, but right now, I don't.

What advice would you share with someone who wants to make a film but isn't sure how to get started?

I would say, first of all, that's amazing, and you should do it. The only way to make a film is to make a film. There's so much gatekeeping. It seems so complicated, and it seems so unattainable to a lot of people that I think people stop before they start. What I would say is, figure out the emotional and energetic resources and talents of the people around you that you can put into a project, and then make something that you can do with that.

I don't want to be too dismissive of the fact that it takes resources to make something that looks like a Hollywood film, but I think the best film work comes out of limitations. Start with "What resources do I have to make this thing?" And then, cater your idea towards that, so you can work from a place of abundance as opposed to, "Well, I can't make *Goodfellas*, so I'm not going to make anything at all."

But then how do you also make yourself open to opportunities if you do want to expand what you have?

That's a question that I've asked myself when I was in a place of artistic loneliness. That feeling of, "I want to make this, but I have no idea how to start," is a thing I think that all artists, and all people face. I only know what I've done, which is to find people who are making things that you admire and just asking them if you can help. Helping other people on their projects is the best way to learn how to make your own.

I didn't go to film school. I had never made [a film], and I produced *Unedited Footage of a Bear*, and I learned through doing it. And then I was like, "Okay. I'll make fewer mistakes next time." You're also always going to learn more by finding your peers who are making things and reaching out to them. If you meet other working artists who are around your experience level, and help each other come up, those are things that are going to help you forever, and that's going to be a better process emotionally.

I'm curious for your thoughts on balancing relationships with friends who are also collaborators, especially when there's money involved, or credit. What kind of pitfalls have you witnessed or experienced?

No, nothing like that has ever happened to me. [laughs]

That's great. Good for you. [Laughs]

Credit is always going to be hard if the work is listed with authors, which the system really wants it to be, right? When you work on a film, there's a list of positions, and you're supposed to have all these delineated roles. You know how we think that we have discrete organs and muscles and stuff in our body, but actually, if you cut open a body, one thing oozes into another, and it's all one thing? That's what making a film is, I think that's what collaboration is. It's really tricky when someone's like, "I'm the heart. I'm the brain," and you're like, "We all did this."

The only thing that I have learned is to be very, very clear upfront with people about what everyone's expectations and goals are. I've worked on film projects where we had discussions about credits after the fact, and it feels bad. If you have somebody who you can talk about the squidgy parts of it with, that's really huge. Direct communication ahead of time, and hopefully, working to build models that aren't so delineated in terms of credit, that's what I'd like to do.

It is an organism, and film is so collaborative. You can make a beautiful film totally alone, but for the most part, they're not being made alone. I hope to make work in a way that celebrates that, more than the individual credit.

I love the body metaphor.

When you look at a dissection, it's like, "Yeah, we made this shit up."

I haven't looked-

But you could.

But I could. Can you tell me a bit about how you navigate the work/life balance stuff?

It's hard. I think different models of grind, or different models of trying to get money out of creative pursuits work differently for different people. All I know is what works for me, which is trying to keep money separate from creativity. The most I've ever made from art in a year was \$16,000, and that was the year I sold a TV pilot to a network, and [I was] like, "Whoa, amazing." The creative skills that I have, I could use them maybe in the film industry, I could produce for money. But that is so draining to me.

I'm also really lucky in that I have a part-time day job that supports me, that's enough money to live on, and that's not most people's reality. It's really easy to be like, "Oh, yeah, what you should do is go get a part-time job that gives you health insurance." In America, that's a unicorn. I used to grind more in terms of constantly thinking about what the next thing would be for my career, and now, I don't do that anymore, and it's going a lot better.

Can you talk about the process of going from the nucleus of an idea to actually making it? What are the parts of the lifecycle that are most invigorating to you, and what are the parts that you hate the most?

It's such a yo-yo back and forth for me, of the joys and terrors of taking an idea from the initial inspiration into actually existing in the world. I always know when an idea has happened that I need to pay attention to. For *Chomp*, I remember lying in my bed five years ago, and I was like, "Somebody biting someone on the news," and I just knew. I was like, "Okay, that has to be something." I usually let it percolate for a little while, and then there's a lot of really embarrassing stream of consciousness Google Docs that I would never let anyone see. I'm like, "Someone biting someone. Who's the biter, and who's the bitee?" That part feels really exciting to me because I have the certainty of knowing that an idea happened that I needed to pay attention to, but there's no limitations yet, and I haven't gotten to the next part, which is narrowing it down, feeling like it's a terrible idea and I'm bad and I've never had a good idea, no one will ever understand me. That's the part I don't like.

What's your attitude towards self-judgment? How much do you reign in criticism of yourself versus pay attention to that voice?

I have been working very hard to not pay attention to that voice, and the quieter that voice gets, I think the better that my work gets. Some people will come to yoga for flexibility because they're so strong and they need to be flexible. Some people come and they're so flexible and they need to get stronger. Maybe some people need to critique their own ideas more, and some people need to critique them less, I don't know. Historically, I'm haunted by self-criticism, and I guess this is something that I took from *the Artist's Way*, so forgive me.

That's okay.

She talks about how the creator in us comes from a very tender and childlike place. Making something is play, and nobody likes to play when they're being yelled at, and I do think that is true.

Yeah. Well, you're a human.

Yes, so far. Until I'm a ghost on the Maine sea coast.

Cricket Arrison Recommends:

Looking up X-rays of what our skulls look like when we still have both sets of our teeth.

The film *She Is Conann* by Bertrand Mandico.

Jetz-Scrubz sponges - I swear to god they don't ever get that weird sponge smell.

The Wind River Mountain Range in Wyoming - no crowds and so beautiful.

The Anatomy of a Story by John Truby - much better than *Save the Cat* and as I've learned even the strangest ideas can benefit from structure.

Name

Cricket Arrison

Vocation

filmmaker and performer

Fact

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