

# On maintaining a punk ethos



Filmmaker Ilya Chaiken and writer Jeanne Fury discuss greenlighting your own projects, taking care of someone else's story, and why flexibility is essential.

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As told to Jeanne Fury, 1873 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [Writing](#), [Collaboration](#), [Independence](#), [Money](#), [Production](#), [Process](#), [Promotion](#).

**We were working on our respective projects for years before we had any deals in place with a publisher or distributor. What did the process look like during those pre-deal years?**

Ilya Chaiken: I come from a background of making narrative films, so this documentary was a departure for me. Basically, I had been spending a lot of time writing scripts and trying to find funding, but I also worked as a [freelance video] editor, and I happened to edit a lot of documentaries. At some point, I was like, "I want to try making a doc," because I can start it on my own. I can just get a camera, start shooting, take sound, and gather archive footage, and because I know how to edit—that's a bonus, because in a documentary, that is very often the most expensive budget item. I could just get the project off the ground. It's very frustrating to be any kind of creative, but in film in particular, you can't make a move without money. So, I just plunged in and approached the band about doing this at the same time they were working with you [on [Fallopian Rhapsody: The Story of the Lunachicks](#)].

Jeanne Fury: We didn't have a book deal for literal years. I would get Theo [Kogan, vocals], Syd [Silver, bass], and Gina [Volpe, guitar] in a room. We'd have a bunch of snacks, and I would just let them talk. It gave me a really strong sense of how they connect with each other. And as we got further along in the story, I was pulling in other interviews.

Ilya: I had done one interview each with Gina, Theo, and Syd solo. In those beginning interviews, they were really trying to dust off some synapses. And then I filmed one of the first times you all got together to interview for the book, and it was the three of them together, and it was a totally different dynamic. Having the three of them there triggering memories was really helpful. It was like the spirit was revived, of them being together and laughing so hard and just fact-checking each other. Someone remembers one detail, and then they elaborate. It was great to watch.

**How did we help each other through our respective projects?**

Jeanne: I had so much self-doubt. I'd never done a book. I'd never written a book proposal. I had so many false starts. I was asking every writer I knew for pointers. By the time we met, you were already forging ahead, and I was like, "Ilya's a professional. She's made films. She's gotten them distributed. She knows what she's doing." But, not to be completely cliché, you had this very punk rock attitude toward it. I didn't feel any doubt coming off of you from a creative standpoint, and that was really important for me to see, in hindsight.

Ilya: You were definitely a huge crutch for me. I was so happy to be able to just call you up and bitch, and be like, "Oh my god, what have I got myself into?" But also, you helped me a lot with background information. It's funny to me that you were perceiving me as this professional filmmaker who goes in and is doing my thing. For me,

it's just like, "If I don't just start making a movie, no one's going to let me make one." I've never been the kind of person who aces that job interview, or is good at networking or schmoozing. Anything that I've ever achieved has just been by having to somehow do the work first. And then, people would be like, "Oh wait, this is kind of good." And then it's always back to square one after a project's done. I used to get to the point where I would just tell people that I was in production. If you tell enough people, then you just have to make it happen.

I was very accustomed to basically making something out of nothing. My first film debuted at Sundance in 2001. It sounds like an exaggeration because it wasn't that long ago in the grand scheme of things, but [the industry] was not interested in women's voices. And people were telling me, "Your life is going to change now. You're going to Sundance, and blah, blah, blah." And my movie did very well, but still, to make my second film, it took another bunch of years to get that off the ground. And it was the same thing—I had to hustle myself until you find that one person that believes in you and will help you. Or not, or you do it yourself. So, I guess in that sense, whether I've wanted to or not, I have a very punk rock approach to filmmaking.

**What else was sustaining us, creatively and mentally, during the making of the doc?**

Ilya: I need to create, and there's usually more obstacles than not, but it's really my main way of communicating with the world. In this project in particular, it was a challenge for me because I wasn't just expressing my own manufactured, fictional story; I was trying to tell somebody else's story. I think one thing that sustained me was that the band really put their trust in me, and that's without seeing anything. It was many years before they saw any kind of a cut, but I didn't want to let them down. That was a big factor, and I really appreciated that they did trust me.

Jeanne: For me, making the book, the Lunachicks are my favorite band in the whole world. I really felt like I was where I was supposed to be, doing what I was supposed to be doing, and I really enjoyed the work. Usually, for me, writing is a slog. I hate it. I'm only happy when it's done—and even then, sometimes, I'm not happy. But honestly, this was completely different, and it felt really good.

Ilya: There's so many challenges and so many downs, but when you hit that stride, it feels so good. When you have that moment, or you write a chapter or edit a scene, and it's like, "Damn, this is pretty good. This works. It works!" That's the best feeling.

**What did we learn about process and creativity from this experience that will help in future projects?**

Jeanne: I realized that the process is going to look different every time, and I have to trust that doing the work is the best way that the map is going to reveal itself. I can write the outline, I can use that as a guide, but I have to be flexible. I can plan a million things out, I can research a million things, but when you're working with other people in this capacity, you have to be accommodating. And people don't think in linear ways; they'll remember something at the last minute that belongs in the beginning of the book. And that's okay, that's not destroying my grand vision. There is no grand vision. It's going to come together the way it comes together.

Ilya: It's not just being flexible, but also willing to let go... Sometimes you've got to lose it because it's detracting from the bigger picture. I've made films where the whole kernel of the film was inspired by a certain scene that I wanted to express, and then that very scene ends up getting cut out of the movie. I think it's kind of a beautiful thing to be able to accept that. A lesson that I've learned with this project and any project I've worked on is that, creatively anyway, every problem is solvable.

**What did we learn from a business perspective?**

Jeanne: I can have what I think is a great idea, but if I can't find a way to market it to a global audience, no publisher's going to want to know my name. It's business and I get that. I was so intent on making sure that *Fallopian Rhapsody* was a book about friendship and sisterhood as much as, if not more than, a book about a punk band. I know the Lunachicks are not the Beatles. Their name is not going to sell this project, but a story about a bunch of misfit, weirdo girls who have these wild adventures together and go through really heart-wrenching stuff and are also some of the funniest people in the world, and they're still friends all these decades later?

That's the universal heart of this project. Also, the final draft is not the end of the work; it's a 24/7 hustle once that book is in the publisher's hands. Don't rely on other people to do the job [of promoting it]. You've got to do it.

Ilya: That's exactly the lesson I learned and I keep learning: it's always going to come back down to you... Business-wise, there's this whole machine created to put the product out. On occasion, I'll feel very lucky to have such-and-such agent out there peddling [my film], and I think I can sit back and be like, "Okay, I did my part. Now they're going to take care of it." Never fucking works out that way. You're still going to have to hustle.

The other thing I learned—and I learn it after every movie and I actually never put it into practice: we have our day jobs, but we need to do our thing. I want to figure out how to actually get paid. I don't know if it's because I'm a woman or if it's just my personality, but it's always hard for me to stand up for myself in that way. I'm just genuinely grateful when anybody wants to help put [my work] out there. So that's still, at my advanced age, something that I'm working on. Lessons are still being learned.

**Ilya Chaiken recommends five things for our times:**

Any album by Gil Scott-Heron—musician, poet, prophet, genius. In a smarter alternate universe, he'd be a household name.

Cabaret (the 1972 Bob Fosse movie, not the play) should have been on heavy rotation during Trump 1.0.

Seven Beauties, a 1975 Italian movie directed by Lina Wertmüller about an abject loser trying to survive fascism.

Daisies, a 1966 Czech film directed by Věra Chytilová. An experimental, subversive treat for the eyes and ears that was banned by the repressive regime of its time.

Jerk of All Trades, the iconic 1995 Lunachicks album. Hilarious, obscene, defiant, and catchy as fuck.

**Jeanne Fury recommends five music memoirs that aren't *Just Kids* by Patti Smith:**

All I Ever Wanted by Kathy Valentine

Be My Baby: How I Survived Mascara, Miniskirts, and Madness, Or, My Life as a Fabulous Ronette by Ronnie Spector

Clothes, Clothes, Clothes. Music, Music, Music. Boys, Boys, Boys. by Viv Albertine

Fingers Crossed: How Music Saved Me from Success by Miki Berenyi

Man Enough to Be a Woman by Jayne County

Name

Ilya Chaiken and Jeanne Fury

Vocation

writer, filmmaker

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