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February 5, 2024 -

As told to Jess Focht, 1294 words.

Tags: Music, Inspiration, Beginnings, Process, Education.

On reminding yourself you're doing enough

Harpist and composer Nailah Hunter discusses finding space and balance, not comparing yourself to others, and the discipline of doing something everyday.

You grew up playing various instruments in church. I was curious if your exposure to different musical elements in that setting influenced your work in general. Did it inspire you to start making music yourself?

I think that growing up in the church and playing music in the church at a young age revealed the sacred aspect of music to me very early and having a reverence for what it can do.

Did it influence you to try new instruments, too?

Well, in terms of the instrument breakdown, I would say that church didn't have anything to do with me wanting to explore other instruments. That really came from hearing film scores, and being curious about how certain textures were being conjured.

It's about the textures. And that was something that I remember remarking on really early, around when I was seven. Thinking about it now, I'm telling my sister, "Oh, I love this moment in the music. This is the best part."

Thinking back, it was the French horn, which is my favorite texture.

Since you mentioned film scores—are there any specific film scores you can think of that come to mind that inspired you?

All of the Hayao Miyazaki movies. And the *Chronicles of Narnia*...that intersection was often a fantasy realm or Medieval Renaissance, Baroque. When I try to round up why I like those time periods, I would say there's a lot of gilding, jewels, and jewel tones. And so I formed a closer relationship to nature because the films weren't as much about technology, and instead a celebration of nature...that's inside and outside of Rococo.

Were you always interested in playing the harp?

I've always been drawn to the harp. My mom used to play this record that was all harp, and I just knew that I loved the sound of it. It's used in the media to portray days of yore, dreams, memories, all sorts of high priestess, intuitive realms. And so, I think I was just naturally drawn to that, because my soul path is that of the high priestess, if you will.

I decided to learn it when I was gifted a small one while I was going to college for vocal performance. And then I was invited into the harp room and allowed to play the pedal harps. I was like, "Oh, this is absolutely for me." And I think even just at that point, I knew that it was going to be this sort of lifelong journey, especially coming to the instrument so late in life. Because it is an unnatural technique. I would compare it to the equestrian of the musical world. It's a large, majestic creature.

There's a reverence and a submission to it that is integral to getting it into your body. Because again, it's not the natural way that you're supposed to hold your hands. None of it is actually what feels best in the body, at least at first.

Did you end up graduating from that school with the original degree you went in with?

Yes. My degree was in Vocal Performance, but technically, I could have also gotten a minor in the harp. I think it's its whole own journey of discussion: what it means to have a degree in Vocal Performance and feel like my voice is the most contentious thing about my musical practice. And that being a part of the journey too-it's this beast that I have to face. This new record is me inviting everyone into my relationship with the beast in the mirror, if you will.

I'm glad you pointed that out because I feel like so many artists and creative people have a relationship with academia that allows for it to crush their creative spirit at times. But, on the topic of learning and discipline, I read that when you were first starting to learn harp, you would sit in a room for six hours to practice. Do you think discipline told you anything about the creative process? And if so, how did it inform your creative process?

I think that's an attractive thing about harp and why I've stayed in the game. If you're not disciplined, if you're not doing it every day, you'll lose it. You'll lose the technique. I mean, we all know Joanna Newsom, harp mom of the century. She talked about how she can't leave her house for more than two weeks. She can't leave without a harp for more than two weeks because all of her technique just falls apart.

And so yeah, that discipline was at play. But I also think there was something that I learned during school when I was like, "Oh, I don't want this a part of my creative experience. This is not the healthy thing to bring in." And I think music school, conservatory environments, there's a spectrum of people who are practicing diligently, and people who are just there to get by. On the far end of that spectrum, there's the people who are making themselves sick, practicing, and releasing all of the joy and healing from the actual action of playing [music].

To this day I grapple with that. I'm like, "What if I had been the person who took it all the way to the toxic land? Would I be shredding now?" You know what I mean? Maybe.

But I also might not be as fortified in my creative endeavors. And it's part of the musical journey, right? Gauging whether you're doing enough.

I always want to be doing enough. It's just a balance, just like anything in life. I feel like it's the most obvious imperative that we have here on the earth, find a balance. It really is all that we have.

Have you felt pressure outside of the schooling we were talking about, for the specific kind of music you're making, and comparing yourself to others? What's your relationship to that?

I think I had to learn early on that comparing myself to other harpists was a fruitless task. I'm making more and more space to just say, "This is my personal journey with harp, and it is enough because I am me."

Have you done anything over the years to strengthen that sense of self and that relationship with your creativity? But I guess what you're saying reminds me of that divine element of self-connection with creativity.

My musical journey has everything to do with my spiritual journey. Making music is the act of grasping beyond the veil, and trying to call back into my body all of the things that fell away from it as I grew from a baby. You know what I mean? It's all that intangible stuff being realized and brought into realms that we can understand more easily. And so yeah, finding that in a synth, finding that in a bell, finding that in the sound of the sea, all of that being a part of the musical journey and the synthesis of all of that being. What's exciting about it and why I'll continue to do it no matter what happens because there's always more to synthesize.

Nailah Hunter Recommends:

Pagan Otherworlds Tarot - the imagery in this deck really speaks to me

My elephant ear plant - my favorite shades of green & I love how they weep when they've had enough water

Eaton Canyon Falls hike in LA - perfect on a crisp LA day

Lume deodorant - where other natural deodorants have failed me, this one shines!

The Leaf and the Cloud by Mary Oliver

Name

Nailah Hunter

Vocation

harpest and composer

Fact

Dillon Howl

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