

On choosing honesty over strategy



Musician Roberto Lange (Helado Negro) discusses the pros and cons of doing everything on your own, why luck and honesty are always better than strategy, and the importance of occasionally pausing to take stock of things.

January 19, 2022 - Roberto Carlos Lange, aka Helado Negro, was born in Fort Lauderdale, Florida to Ecuadorian immigrants. His latest album, *Private Energy*, out via *RVNG Intl.*, is a collection of personal and political avant-pop music. Often performing between two costumed, choreographed humans he calls Tinsel Mammals, his live show contemplates the balance between performance art and musical performance.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3133 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Success](#), [Focus](#), [Process](#), [Independence](#), [Identity](#).

You've been around for a decade and a half, but recently it seems like you've come into your own. You've had a slow, patient approach to making things; you keep going, and find new ways to keep going.

I think it's all really luck and maybe listening to people, more than anything. Luck and the sense that there's no strategy. There's no strategy that's ever going to win you a prize. That's what I've learned the most. That, and listening to people who can be mentors. Also, touring with people who are successful has taught me a lot—seeing how they do things and how they've figured it out.

They're often successful in the sense that they're organized. You see how they're gathering themselves before a show or after the show; how they compose themselves when they're performing. That's taught me a lot. I'm inspired by how people talk about themselves, how they do the things that they talk about, and how they execute all of these thoughts. That ends up informing me and helps me understand why I'm still doing what I'm doing. I'm always like, "Oh it's not about money." And I think a little bit of that has held true. I've put my words into action. I'm like, "Okay, let me keep doing what I'm doing the way I want to do it." I've seen the people that I admire the most, they do it really well because they've done what they've been doing, and that's why they've succeeded in finding their goals.

You've played benefits for public schools in Brooklyn, and recently wrote me about organizing benefits for Puerto Rico. Is being part of a community and being willing to do things when it seems like an interesting project part of your mindset and reason for doing music?

I think the most important thing about you is the thing that you can offer up, which is you. I try to offer it up whenever I can, and even more so if it's helping someone out. That's all I really care to try to do. It's sounds kind of funny to say, but if you can help people out, why not?

I don't have money and I never came from having money. A lot of people have love and they gave me love—mentors or people who were helping me out, putting me on, letting me open for them. It was never like they handed me cash; they just handed me opportunities and they were just like, "Well, you do what you do." The same with those opportunities, like the school benefits, where I was like, "Well, there's these kids who may not ever have a chance unless someone steps in." You don't have to put your name on it.

You've done a lot of collaborations with a lot of different people. What do you get out of a collaboration?

It's like a conversation. Some of the most exciting collaborations have taught me the most about myself and how far I can push myself with my own ideas and seeing how people are bit by the bug and driven with their idea and seeing how they finish up. Being a team member is the best thing about learning to be a collaborator, because then you can collaborate with yourself—you have conversations and finish something.

You become a passenger in their perspective on something. Even though you're probably driven to be like, "This is how it should sound or how it should be." You get a chance to see where it could go. I've learned to be able to give up my ego and pride for the sake of a song, an album, or a project. To make sure that that thing is the best that it can be without being that guy who's trying to put his stamp on everything.

You recently had your first headlining show in L.A. Is taking the step from one level to the next stressful? Or is it exciting?

It's all of it. It's stressful. People don't talk about these kinds of things. People don't talk about how to prepare for things like this. I've done this alone for so long. Alone meaning, I've had to self-propel every day. I've had an amazing booking agent for the last seven years who's done an amazing job. And then Asthmatic Kitty, who's helped me out so much in the past.

The stress is the little things. When someone's like, "Well, you need to sell these tickets." I think people forget now what that means: selling tickets equals the ability to keep doing what you're doing. You can't really sell records anymore because everyone is waiting for streams to happen. That's like a whole new thing I haven't been able to wrap my head around.

The pressure is being able to just get one ticket sold and then the next one after that. Not like I'm selling them hand-by-hand but it's stressful because you don't want to walk into a place that's huge and have it be empty. It's all a crapshoot.

With all of this, I've realized there's no strategy, there's nothing. All you can do is do everything you can. You want to know that you did everything you could to make that moment the best moment it could be with everything that you have at that time.

Then you gain another piece of knowledge on how to approach the next thing, without trying to overthink it too much and not over strategize. I think that ends up being the detriment of any musician, any artist, or any performer. People tend to over strategize with their team. They're like, "How can we catapult all these different good scenarios for you." I think that comes with time and experience. You experience it and you're like, "This is a waste. We shouldn't be trying to think about this *and* think about something now." That's what I've learned mostly from doing shows like this where I'm crossing my fingers that everyone that said they're gonna show up, shows up. We're all doing everything we can to promote it.

How do you avoid strategizing? It's in people's nature to think: "Alright, I need to come up with a plan." Is it something where you're able to be like, "Let's just see how things go." Or "If we approach this honestly, then it'll pay off in the end." It's more long-term goal versus short-term.

Yeah. It is. You set a long-term goal and then you have to make a bunch of decisions to get there. You need to reach all the decisions leading there—those end up being the short-term goals. Having people who are around you that are optimistic and understand what you're doing. Why I'm saying optimistic is they're not deterred by "no." "No" ends up being the thing that de-inflates you. That's the way to not over-strategize, where you're overthinking, "Okay, let's try to get this to happen." And then it doesn't happen and you're thinking about why it didn't happen. You've gotta just move on to the next thing and stay optimistic. You need to ask: "How are we trying to get there?" It's kind of like getting a flat tire. Like, what are you gonna do? Fix it? Or are you going to cry about it?

You have a band you play with but essentially the project is you? Does that make it easier or harder?

I mostly play by myself, 90% of the time. When there's the opportunity, I overpay musicians. So if anyone wants to get overpaid, you should look me up. [laughs] Overpay them in the sense that when I get the budget I feel like I need to give them as much as I can. And so, I make it impossible for myself to ever have a band, which is maybe some unconscious thing.

It's a lot easier to travel by myself, and it's a lot easier to get these shows done, the ones that I really want to do, if I'm by myself. That said, it's harder because then I can't share responsibilities with anyone. I'm constantly in control. For a long time I loved that because I can direct everyone and I really enjoyed orchestrating the evening. But there's a part of me now that's just like... I've done that for so long that it's not the thing I'm looking forward to doing.

I just wish people knew their job at this point. It's kind of like when you have to rewind the tape every night, and then hit play. It is like a cassette. Moments where you are worn thin and forget to communicate something.

These days musicians need to be a bit more creative about making and saving money, because people don't really buy records as much. Folks need to cobble things together.

I've always done things my own way. I didn't go to music school and I never thought that this was going to be a professional choice. I started taking it seriously a while ago but it was like...*holy moly*. It's always just been about me being free and having the freedom to do whatever I want. The people I want around me are the people that are going to support that. I roll up with these crazy costumes on stage or I do residencies and various projects because it's the thing I want to do. It's not because it was the thing I thought was going to be the next best thing for my project. There's no strategy other than I really want to do this.

I think, "This is the best thing that I want to do, for me." Whereas maybe there's a lot of business mistakes and that ends up being the part where I'm trying to figure out how to finance it all. That's where the creativity comes in. You're like, "Okay, I wanted to make these costumes, now how do I make it work?" Then it becomes a part of the show and all of a sudden it becomes this integral part of my show, where it's really exciting. It becomes its own thing. Stuff like that, if you believe in it enough, you make it work.

When did you sense that you were moving from doing music as a hobby to becoming a professional?

Back in the early 2000's, previous to Helado Negro, I used to release records on a label called Beta Bodega, which was mostly electronic music. It was very leftist leaning political music, mostly based on Latin-American politics and social ideas. We used to tour Japan mainly. Sets would start at two in the morning and would end at six. We wouldn't sleep at all. It was really exciting, it was like cross-country performances in these random towns all over Japan for like five or six years. Then one day, I remember being there on one of the last tours and I couldn't sleep, I had super insomnia, realizing the disconnect with the language and the culture. I was like, "Man, this has been awesome but I don't know... it's not feeding anything for me. I want to do something that feeds the desire to grow." Which I have. And so I started Helado Negro and I think within Helado Negro, everything changed the perspective. I was like, this is something real for me that I can see. It has all these different potentials.

I see your "Young, Latin, and Proud" shirts everywhere. What's that been like, having something go viral, and then take on a life of its own?

It's cool. It was a song first and then we made a shirt for the song. It was an obvious attachment for people who identify as Latinx or support the song, or support the message. A lot of people that identify as Latinx or have some kind of mix of Latin-American in them, they always ask me, "Man, I want to wear this shirt." And I'm like, "Man, you can wear it. You can do it." And like a lot of people I know that are white or that don't identify as that, they also wear it. It's really cool.

I have too many stories about that. It's created an intimacy with me and a specific audience and there's a lot of people who tell me a lot of different things about their own personal relationship with their identity and the way they were brought up and how this gave them a newfound perspective for themselves. Maybe not newfound, but they've found another person that they can count on to be in their corner whenever they're feeling down, or feeling different, or feeling confused.

I've heard a lot of crazy stories, a lot of good stories, and a lot of tough stories about "Young, Latin, and Proud." It's exciting, but I also never know what to say because it's hard to take it all in and then also feel like you should be giving something else out. You never know. Like I said, all this stuff is a crapshoot. I wasn't making the song with this grand strategy. It was just a personal song. I think those are the things that people connect with the most.

I think the idea of not having a strategy also creates longevity because then you're in it for honest reasons, so you keep going. There was that time after Nirvana, where these bands would get signed by major labels; they'd be around for three months and then disappear. Because, if it doesn't happen right away, the marketing team gives up, and it's like, "All right, it didn't happen. Next."

And I think that's happening now. I think it's always happened. It's happening with everything. There's a certain aspect that I've noticed with commercializing music that's coming from young Latinx people. And they're like, "Well, how can we find the bands that are doing this?" And I've been approached by a few people, not with anything big, but I've had conversations that I thought were really awkward. I was like, "This feels out of character for me to even consider this." You can make wholesome decisions and be a wholesome person, but you can also make money doing that, you know?

You have to end up taking stock after a couple years, and that's what I've been doing. What were the good decisions? What were the bad decisions? Let's move forward from here. That's where I'm at now. It's not like I want to own anything, but I definitely want to protect my property and my intellectual rights to everything, and then also to be able to continue to do what I'm doing. So selling tickets to shows is important. We figure out the best way to do it without it being some weird plan just to sell this place out.

That's one kind of success. To you, what does it mean to be truly successful?

There's nothing that I feel that I've done that's been unsuccessful with Helado Negro. At that moment, after a show, everything has been achieved. It's very moment to moment, there's no moment that feels like, "I made it." I don't think there is. It's more about feeling good about the project. Whenever I feel weird or uncomfortable, that's when I know I have to start taking stock again. That's when you have to rebuild where your mind is at and ask yourself, "What are my intentions?"

Success ends up being freedom. And that comes from the things that I admired the most growing up, which were originals. I feel like all originals, who were doing the thing that they were wanting to do the most, that gave them freedom. Whether it be breakdancers, the graffiti writers that I really liked, or punk rock artists that I enjoyed—there was a freedom to all that stuff. I think that ends up being success. It's the freedom to be what you want to be and do what you want to do.

Helado Negro recommends:

∞ **my wife/partner/collaborator/bff** Kristi Sword: We live and work in the same space, sharing rooms, windows and a bed. We've been doing this for over 15 years, living and working and making our life together. I'm pointing towards her visual—She focuses making money with jewelry, which her non-jewelry work informs so much. But this work is much more private and meditative. I learn so much from her—just watch this video

^ **my friend** DJ Rupture's Book, Uproot is a remarkable book about music and people. I admire his work and the dialogues he creates with the people and places he interacts with. So much of the work sticks with me and makes me wish I could be right there with him.

* **visual inspiration** Norman McLaren: I first saw the film Neighbours (1952) in college and knew that I wanted to

make work that felt like that. This film Synchromy is a little more primitive but crazy complex in the process—and it's extremely gratifying

☆ **collaborator/spiritual brother** David Ellis is a great artist. When I first moved to NYC he was one of the first people I began collaborating with. The main work I did with him were these rhythmic, solenoid-driven acoustic trash sound sculptures. There was a beautiful fluidity in the collaboration, the concept and project was all David but creating and executing the vision was a great journey together. We would build each drum from a piece of trash based on its sound and visual aesthetic and build patterns and rhythms one sound at a time. Another extension of these pieces were typewriters that would type out the lyrics of a song to a tempo in a programmed rhythm. This one, "The Message", based off the Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five song even has solenoids tapping out the melody on glass bottles. We also made another one that was similar but with the song "O Superman" by Laurie Anderson.

This album Beverly Glenn-Copeland's album Keyboard Fantasies has been one of the most looped albums this year for me. It was recommended to me by Nina Bower Crooke from Commend. I'm always asking her a million questions about what music she recommends, and she has not steered me wrong. This album is so damn special and I've really started following the label Invisible City Editions because of it. I recommend this song first "Sunset Village".

Name

Helado Negro

Vocation

Musician

Fact

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Photo by Ebru Yildiz