

Henry Rollins on defining success



January 26, 2021 - Henry Rollins is an American musician, writer, actor, radio host, activist, spoken word artist, and comedian. He was the singer of the hardcore punk band Black Flag and later the Rollins Band among other solo projects and collaborations. He won a Grammy in 1995 for the spoken adaptation of his 1994 tour memoir, *Get in the Van*. Since the early 1980s he's released too many things to list here.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2692 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Acting](#), [Music](#), [Comedy](#), [Focus](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Independence](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Mental health](#).

Creative Blocks

I don't know if I've ever had one. I'm not trying to say I'm somebody with a volcanic output coming out of me all the time, but if somebody ever says, "Well, what do you do about writer's block?" I'm like, "I don't think I'm a writer." I don't put any of those titles on myself, so I don't acknowledge those pressures. Some days I got stuff, some days I don't, and some days I write about the fact I got nothing to write about. But, I do try to write 1,000 words a day. It's just like going to the gym. Some workouts are better than others. I think the less pressure you put on yourself, the better. In my opinion, it'd be hard to sit in a room and go, "Okay, damnit. Be creative."

Some days you might not want to face the agony it takes to process the stuff you have in you—but this kind of work is not for the fragile. You have to be somewhat of a warrior. It's why you see a lot of writer types that are kind of angry, itchy people. That's because they're playing chess with their psyche all the time. You have to be ready to grapple with the fact that some days there will be nothing. You've got to trust and remember that on other days there'll be too much and it'll make you crazy in a different way. So, I don't really put that much pressure on myself to be like: "Okay, it's Tuesday, I must be creative." I'm gonna see if there's anything there first.

More often than not, I just don't have the time or the strength to heft all the dots I want to connect in my mind. Finding the time to put it all down and having the skill to articulate it into a form that's understandable by someone else—that's the challenge. Rarely is it a case of "I've got nothing." Sometimes when I'm really depressed, there'll be nothing there because I'm grappling with depression. But as soon as that lifts an inch, I can get my fingers under the door, jam it open, and get out.

Sleep

I do two shifts. I do the day shift and the night shift. The day shift is coming to an end. I'm gonna take a nap, work out, eat, and then I'll be up to about two o'clock this morning on the night shift. I like both: Daytime is more editing and business-y stuff and the nighttime is more the creative.

I get about five hours of sleep a night. It ends up being between five and six during the week and then usually Friday night into Saturday, I'll hit it for more like six or seven hours—but rarely do I do eight hours.

I'm not exactly mister bouncing-with-energy guy. I'm just kind of nervous and I want to go. The power nap is very instrumental in what I do. I take like one or two four to seven minute naps a day. I can sit in the chair in my office right in front of my computer and knock out for a solid four to six minutes and then wake up like "boom!..." Usually at the end of the day, I'll do another one of those right before I work out. I can skip it, but I feel groggy on the treadmill if I don't.

I do a lot of pushups. You know how people have drinking games where every time someone says something you got to take a drink? I try to listen to a lot of records every day, so at night I'll play a bunch of singles. Every time you flip the single over, you have to go do 15 or 20 pushups on your knuckles. And so, if you want to hear the other song, you gotta do your pushups. I get up, flip the record, pushups, and sit down. After a night of listening, I will be dead because I've done so many pushups. I'm always trying to burn calories and trying and get myself worn out enough to sleep. That's the problem: Getting tired enough to sleep.

Multiple Creative Outlets

If I'm not feeling writing one day, I always owe people a radio show. I work with multiple stations, so I owe about seven shows right now. If I don't get much writing done, I'll just go, "Okay, I guess it's radio time," and just go bang away on that for a while. I just reckon if I'm awake, I need to be doing something. Even if it's nothing, I'm working in that nothingness. I usually have a notepad on any flat surface where I am because there's always a note to take down, an idea to come up with, a thing to do later. I'm rarely doing nothing.

That's why I don't have a TV. Because I will watch it. I know I'm susceptible. I'd rather have leaner, more work-oriented surroundings, which is what was around me as a kid. We had a small TV in our apartment—my mom and I—and every time I'd turn it on or go towards it, she'd go, "Oh, come on. Let's put a record on." Like, why are you falling for that when we could be listening to Bob Dylan or something. And she was right. The record is always better than the TV. She was like, "Let's read aloud to each other instead." Then all of a sudden we're reading *Great Expectations* by Dickens.

I put myself in an environment where it's always easier to work than it is to eat. I mean—even in the kitchen—the kitchen is basically built as an office with a kitchen. There's a big table, it's lit for work, and there are lots of outlets. You can always just plug in, and there's no excuse not to get some work done.

I think it's important if you're a creative person, or aspire to be, that you don't spend too much time aspiring or asking advice. Just get going and address what's roaring inside you.

I've asked advice a couple of times in my life. Please don't misconstrue this as me thinking I'm beyond reproach or criticism and everything I do is great or right. I'm just not waiting around that much. If I've got an idea, I'm just acting on it.

I think the only time I've asked for advice is from Ian MacKaye... well, not really advice. When I was offered the job to be in Black Flag, I went on this audition. I didn't tell him. I just went to New York, did it, came back, and he said, "Where have you been the last day?" I told him this crazy story. I said, "I'm the singer of Black Flag now." He went, "What?" I explained, you know, I did the audition and I got it, I'm leaving. I said, "So, what do you think?" And he said, "Are you kidding? This is gonna be great," and he took me to the bus station. I still have the Greyhound bus ticket. That's the only time I ever really asked like, "What do you reckon?"

I don't look for advice. Could I be taught a thing or two? Oh, hell yeah. I'd rather just get it from trial and error and figuring out how I get through the maze.

Defining Success and Failure

I don't look for an outside opinion. I must be true to the idea. I'm not doing this to point to a shelf and say, "Look at all those things that I did." I'm not trying to impress anyone. In fact, I keep one or five of everything I ever did squirreled away in an area that's hard to get to. It's not sitting prominently like over the mantle.

When something's done, I'll go, "Okay, cool," and I'll shelve it, and I'll rejoice that the damn thing is done and my desktop is empty so I can fill it with the next project. I'm a shipbuilder. I don't want to sail in them. I want you to sail in them. I'm just happy that they leave the harbor so I can have an empty workplace. And the glee of getting the component parts and starting from scratch starts all over again, and we build the next ark.

Success to me is, "Yep, holds water. Someone else might dig this. I sidestep my ego to really look at this, and it still does not suck too hard." Wrap your knuckles on the hood and send it out into the light of day. Then take about 30 seconds to go, "Yeah!" Then get back to work. To me, that's a very utilitarian, very kind of punk rock post punk look at things. It's like working at Factory Records. You made a good product, now go make another. I'm not warmed by my own. I know people who really love playing their own records and playing you their records. I'm divorced from a project of mine as soon as I'm done with it. I want to use any available amount of time to start hurling myself into the next thing.

Not being afraid to fail

You gotta fail. You gotta go out and blowout. If you've never failed, that's how you lose a fight in the ring. It's good to go on stage and bomb. I mean, I've done it a few times. You learn what not to do again. It's good. Failure is good. Failure leads to success. Being rude to people teaches you politeness. I abhor rudeness. I hate it. Whenever I'm rude, I never mean it. It slips out. I'm tired. I didn't look at the situation well enough. I was impatient, and I fall all over myself in apology. But it's a damn good lesson.

Failure is your friend. Those who think they've never failed? Man, there are blessings in those failures that they should acknowledge. Every time I've blown out, hopefully I took the value of that.

"Just Do It"

The Nike brand is scary but the sentiment is good. That "just do it" thing, that's how you get to do a bunch of things. I just say yes a lot. That's how I've ended up in like 30 movies and a bunch of TV. I've never taken acting lessons. I just want to do stuff. Like, "Hey, they offered you a part in this movie. Do you want to be in it?" ... "Yeah. What is it?" I said yes first because sitting around, it drives me crazy. I don't do vacations. I travel, but I don't do vacations. I don't go anywhere that's leisurely. I come back six pounds lighter than having a parasite. Just because life's too short.

Someone once said that when you buy a book, you're not really buying the book—you're buying the time you think you'll have to read it. It's like all those records you say you'll listen to some day, but that day never comes. 50 finds you real fast. Like, you're 28, and all of a sudden, you're 50. It happens so fast. And that "woulda, coulda, shoulda"? You better do it while you still have knees. You better do it before you start getting up and everything pops and clicks because, man, it changes.

People put stuff off, like the angry guy who didn't climb the mountain when he was 20 because there wasn't time. No, you didn't make time. Any project... "One day, I'm gonna write that novel." Pal? You better start tomorrow morning because the right time never happens. It's when you boldly determine it. It's like running on a rainy day. You're fine once you get out there. The only difficulty is getting off the couch when you lace your shoes up.

That hesitation, that's what holds a lot of people back. That's why I never say, "I'm a writer," because I don't want to shoulder that. I just want to do some writing. "What would a writer do in this situation?" I don't know, man. Ask one. And don't tell me what he said, I'm busy.

I'm not a tough guy. I'm not brave. I'm just curious. I'm very well aware of how quickly life goes. You know, Ian [MacKaye] and I both have a lot of dead friends. Everything from suicide to overdose to wrong place, wrong time. There's a lot to get done. Whether you want to deal with that or not is up to the individual. You just make up your mind, like, "I'm gonna write this book." How many people are gonna read it? I don't care. How can I control that? I just want to do the damn thing. That allows me to go unrestrained.

I always have like five books going at once. That anyone will read them, that'd be cool. But I'm not making them to get read; I'm making them to get them out of me. You gotta do something with your life. You can watch TV. You can inhale cocaine. Or you can sit down and write, or sing, or jump up and down, whatever it is. It's all just choices. So much of this is just committing to the time and the discipline and the agony of creativity—because it turns on you all the time.

Henry Rollins recommends:

Here are five people who I really got a lot from. Not necessarily how I do my thing, but five people who really impacted my life.

Ian MacKaye. Some of the ways I do what I do with people in life is because of Ian. Ian has this natural integrity. I have some, but I have to remember. I have to squelch my ambition and my anger so I don't let that lead me, because it leads you right into a sucker punch when you leap before you read what's on the brochure and you jump into a den of snakes. Ian walks up to it and goes, "Hmm!" I jump in and go, "Ow! There's broken glass down here." People ask about me and Ian, I say, "Ian is the guy who keeps you out of trouble. I'm the guy who gets you out of trouble if you're in it," because I'm crazy enough to jump in and help you out. Like, "It's a volcano." I want to see what it's like in there. Ian'll go up and say, "Don't go over there. That's hot lava." He'll keep someone like me from going in it because I'll go right in it. But I'll go right in it and get you out.

Ian MacKaye's mother, Ginger MacKaye.

Greg Ginn and Chuck Dukowski of Black Flag. I learned so much from them. I thought I was a hard worker until I joined that band and I realized that you can go seven hours longer than you thought you could.

Heidi May, the woman who manages all my stuff. I have a bunch of different companies and she manages all my affairs, and she's been working with me for 20 years. She's just a very good person, where I'm not. I am a better person because of her. I've shut my mouth and listened, and I've always benefited from listening to her. Even though I don't always agree, the fact that I can sit and listen and I respect her very much, and I've gotten a lot of help from her. She's very patient, and she's just a very decent person. We were raised very differently. She helps me. Like, she goes, "You know, that thing you're saying, you're being very cheap right now." I'm like, "Really?" She's like, "Yeah, listen to yourself." And I'll go, "Okay," and yeah, we'll talk in the car or something and I'm like, "Wow, thank you." I think differently and do things differently because of Heidi.

Name

Henry Rollins

Vocation

Jack-of-all-trades

Fact

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