

Lushlife on doing more than one thing at a time



December 6, 2017 -

As told to Resham Mantri, 3291 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Production](#), [Beginnings](#), [Adversity](#), [Identity](#), [Day jobs](#), [Promotion](#).

What does it take to be an independent musician these days? What skills have you nurtured to do what you do?

One of the components of the creative process I always gravitated towards is curation. I come from a background outside of studying traditional instruments. I was a DJ from the age of 11 or 12. A big part of growing up was making DJ mixes and mixtapes, and that curatorial aspect is something that I've just inherently carried into my music from my first record, *Cassette City*. I had Deerhoof and Ariel Pink and Elzhi from Slum Village, a wide variety of all the stuff that I was into and listening to. Just bringing it all together.

Early on that was maybe more novel than it is now. 10 years on, it's probably pretty par for the course to see a variety of people from different genres on people's records. But, for me, it does come from this mindset of curation. I've never been a person who's just into hip hop and that's all I am and who I am, or indie rock and that's it. Working with a variety of people has always allowed me to flex my mental and emotional and musical muscles in different areas.

As an independent artist, how do you manage switching gears from the business side of things, like scheduling appointments, to the music side of being in the studio?

I tell people that if I knew growing up that being a musician was going to be 80% writing emails and 20% actually making music, I perhaps would've done something else. What I've come to realize and embrace, though, is that creating the business and writing the emails and making sure that your collaborators are on the same page with you and getting to the studio on time and being somebody who's not just there to make music but also to make sure that the logistics are in place for all of this to happen is not only fun, but in 2017, that's what you have to do.

In the '90s, before the music industry collapsed or was democratized, DIY was a rallying cry or a choice. My first record came out right after MySpace came to exist. Early on in my career, you had to become the marketing person. You had to essentially do your own PR and you had to learn how to write copy and learn how to make a website.

Having to juggle all of that to have your cottage indie brand, you become adept at wearing all of those hats, for better or for worse. Early on, I think there was an idea in my head that I would get to be this pure musician and everything else would be taken care of. There was this initial rude awakening that to really do music in the new millennium, you have to wear all these hats and what I discovered is I like a lot of those aspects of creating content—in some cases, more than I like working on the records themselves.

It's become this one thing to me. I can't separate it. Especially if you look at my most recent full release, which is called *My Idols Are Dead + My Enemies Are In Power*. It was an interdisciplinary mixtape with other musicians, but also there's professors and legal scholars who all contributed to this protest mixtape. For instance, I have [Porochista Khakpour](#), an Iranian-American novelist, on it. I knew some of my content drew parallels to what was going on in the Middle East in the Reagan era and I prompted her in a more directional way than I did with other folks. It goes back to the curatorial aspect of just how I operate. For this, I did all of the graphic design for the merchandise and built the website and the e-commerce solution to raise money for it. All of that felt like one thing to me.

I don't have an enormous platform, but the one thing I've been doing for a while now is bringing people together to make statements, and I think more than ever I want to continue to leverage that to help cross-pollinate a lot of these silos of information. I'm friends with novelists on Facebook and indie rock musicians and rappers and they all have really important things to say about the state of the world and sometimes I see those voices not being able to cross-pollinate. Something like *Idols + Enemies* was a way for me to do that.

There's always this intentionality with what I do. I saw the rapper Future saying "I record 400 tracks to make a 10-song album in the end," and while that's amazing and pretty insane, I generally record 10 songs to make a 10-song album. I, at least at a very high level, have a sense of intent for what I want each thing to be on a piece of music or whatever I'm making. I know what the end goal is and I just iterate until I get there.

You don't have songs that you finish that don't end up working and you have to toss?

No. That's been a bit of a curse for me because a lot of other producers do work that way. They have lots of sketches and ideas, but my level of intentionality doesn't leave me with much of, "Oh I have a bunch of these ideas just sitting around." Lately I've been doing more work in film and television or producing stuff for other folks. I just don't have a lot of stuff sitting around so I've had to ramp up the volume of work I've been doing. Stuff for Vice and NBC and Nickelodeon. It's not like I can just pick from some enormous catalog of stuff I've made for a long time.

You had a day job when you were starting, right?

I put out my first record, *Cassette City*, in 2009, and then while I was working on my second album I got a job as marketing director for a tech startup. I have no background in marketing. I don't even have a college degree. I was hired purely on the strength of what I was able to show, the "portfolio" of ways that I had marketed Lushlife. It was the first time that I saw the skillset that I organically built. You need to make a digital album cover so you need to learn Photoshop. You need to build a website so you need to learn CSS and HTML. After years of cobbling together those skills, I got a decent career-track job that was great that I did for almost half a decade.

Was it important for you to have a job also that allowed you to keep doing music?

Yeah, and that was great. That was a huge part of signing on for this gig. They were very understanding. They knew that I had a career and I toured. My benefits were amazing. I'd be able to take probably a little more than two months a year off to travel and play shows and things as necessary.

Counterintuitively I discovered for a time that actually having a bi-weekly paycheck helped me be mentally in a place where my creativity was in a better flow. Even

though I didn't have that much time. Early on it was great. I thought that this would just eat up all my time but what eats up your time a lot of the time is worrying about, "Holy shit, I'm a broke musician and how am I going to pay rent?" With that not being the case, I felt like just having a stable lifestyle, my creativity flourished.

But I definitely reached a ceiling at that, too. My 2016 album, *Ritualize*, took me three or four years to finish. Ultimately, if you're spending eight hours working on somebody else's dream, then get home and you just want to sit on the sofa and smoke a joint or whatever and instead you have to try to force yourself to be creative, that's a hard, slow, arduous task. I just maxed out having a day job and wanted to go do other stuff last year. And I think a lot of the seeds that I planted nine or 10 months ago are just starting to come to fruition.

But that job was super instructive to me. It was powerful to realize that all this shit that you do to the end of making records come out is really highly applicable as far as skill sets go.

How would you define success as far as your creative work is concerned?

Having a level of both critical and popular acclaim or success is what everybody wants in my shoes, but more empirically, just the ability to make stuff is a core value for me to what I do. Even more than being a musician or a rapper, I identify as somebody who makes stuff. That's what I really get kicks out of—I envision this thing and then six months or eight months or a year or two years later, it tangibly exists.

That can be a lot of things. It doesn't have to be rap records or music at all. It's evolving to be different things as I'm entering new stages of my life and becoming just creatively restless. I still have stuff to say through music and music's the core of who I am and what I do, but I made three records and if you count mix tapes and stuff I have several releases, so I get excited to do different stuff, too. I've always just wanted to create stuff and make stuff come to life.

Your parents immigrated from Calcutta. How does your heritage, your parents immigrating here, play out in your work?

Early on I think I tried to almost actively divorce my upbringing or my culture from the music. I'm very proud and active as a second-generation Indian American, but at the same time, I always felt like a lot of the hip hop particularly that came out of the Indian diaspora, it always felt like it was, in a very cheap way, mining ... "Oh, let's sample a [Bhangra] song and turn it into a hip hop thing." I'm a purist about stuff and hip hop is no exception, so I never wanted to go down that path even remotely at all. When you hear my early records, you will hear no inkling of my life experiences in that realm.

At the same time, there's been an evolution with me, and also everything else going on around me, where I think there's an imperative for me to become more vocal about those experiences. I think starting with *Idols + Enemies* you can hear more personal insights into my upbringing, dealing with racism, things like that.

I have a record coming out next year that goes much more deeply into that. I've been more vocal in a public sphere, too. I wrote [an op-ed in the Washington Post](#) after there were this rash of killings of Indians working in America. The idea of being an apolitical musician's musician, there's no room for that anymore. If you have any kind of platform you've got to try to do something.

What's something you wish someone told you when you were starting out?

There's a litany of things I wish I knew. One thing that I truly, honestly feel—if I went back in a time machine and told myself how it would be, I might not have even embarked on the journey altogether: It's taken a decade-plus for this vehicle of Lushlife, or my creative endeavors in general, to bear enough fruit that I'm living fairly comfortably. There's always a carrot on a stick in the entertainment industry and you feel like "Oh, it's just right around the corner. I'm going to be ballin'."

If I'd known how long it was going to take, I maybe wouldn't have embarked on it. On the other hand, it's also what's made it the deepest, most fruitful experience of my life professionally or otherwise, to have gone through really tough times and stayed the course and to have continued to create.

I came up in a time where technology was radically changing the music industry and people were trying to figure out what new models could exist for artists to make a living. For most of the 2000s it was a really tough time. If I'd known how much of a slog it would be, would I have decided to do something else? Who knows. I think the desire to create and make stuff is a powerful one so even if I had known that, it probably wouldn't have deterred me.

You've spent a lot of your time creating music in Philadelphia, and building a community of collaborators and musicians there.

I've been here just over a decade. The first moment that I really felt like I could live and breathe and subsist as a musician is all thanks to this city. I'd had a longish stint in London and a shorter one in New York, but those bigger cities, which are obviously much bigger media centers, are also oppressively expensive for musicians, especially early on in their careers like I was.

The moment I settled down in Philly, I found a community of like-minded artists. But also, a lot of the time I'm just working by myself, and so what's really important to me and what was really important in discovering, was that Philly is a city with a lot of the cultural trappings of a major metropolitan area in terms of access to the arts and stuff, which is important to keeping my blood pumping and my brain moving.

At the same time, you could rent a place at a affordable price for somebody who's trying to do music full-time with minimal financial returns coming in at any given moment. I will forever be thankful to Philly for giving me that launching pad. Now, 10 years on, I still own a home in Philly. A lot of my work does take me to New York and LA., but Philly will always be home base.

You're doing some work with the Philadelphia sports teams, right?

I'm not at all a sports fan so it's strange that for the last three or four years I've been closely associated in Philadelphia to the Eagles. They brought me on to create new musical programming in the stadium. They felt like they needed new energy. Prior to me, a lot of music in the stadium was just classic jock jams and that kind of stuff. For every home game, I create a musical experience that embraces the stuff you'd imagine. Classic rock stuff, but also classic rap stuff. '90s boom bap stuff. House of Pain. I think I have to play "Jump Around." It's my job to bring new energy, and to play some stuff that's maybe not on a lot of the audience's radars but that really fits in with the experience and feels a little bit more modern.

I've been doing that for three years and each year I put together an official tailgate Spotify playlist, which is a lot of fun. It's just another one of those weird things that happens as you navigate a career as a creative person.

Music, for me, is becoming this launching pad for broader creative endeavors. In my mid-30s I've found myself getting a little bit restless with just being Lushlife the rapper and producer. I realized that one of the high-level skill sets I have is the idea of being able to take a project from start to finish, so I've been

applying that in a variety of different fields.

I think that's something that all millennial creatives have to contend with: you can't just be one thing today. I'm finding that it's been both a creative release and also, honestly, from a financial standpoint, having hands in book publishing and developing for film and TV and a variety of things as well as making records has both helped me to continue to flourish creatively and financially and also there's lots of ups and downs in creative life. If you have three or four different hustles, when you get that downer email on one of them, you can just be like, "Alright, these other three things are going great."

5 things inspiring me right now - off the dome! by Lushlife

"Money Changes Everything" by Cyndi Lauper - Cyndi Lauper's debut album, *She's So Unusual* is brilliant, front to back. But, I've lately been coming back to the opening track, "Money Changes Everything." It struck me that the song feels somehow like it could've been written by '70s punk band, Television. Turns out it's a cover of a much lesser known song by a punk band called The Brains. It's cool to see a song re-contextualized so brilliantly while still somehow maintaining its original spirit.

David Byrne's book, *How Music Works* - I know I'm late to the game on this, but I just got a copy of David Byrne's tome on writing, recording, and performing music. I mean, I've always known that Byrne is a smart dude, but I'm still blown away by how beautifully conceived and executed the book is. Of course, it's particularly instructive to me as a musician, but I'd also recommend it as a great read for folks in any number of creative pursuits.

Happy Foot / Sad Foot, Los Angeles - A few weeks ago in LA, someone hipped me to the story of the Happy Foot / Sad Foot podiatrist sign in Silver Lake. It's like this rotating sign for a podiatrist office in Silver Lake that's become strangely iconic, even appearing in novels by David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Lethem. Plus, I learned that The Eels song "Sad Foot Sign" is about the landmark. Instructive that creative force can come from the most unusual places.

DJ Jazzy Jeff's Philadelphia Boiler Room Set - To me, this is a perfectly crafted DJ set. I can't stop listening to it. The song selections are relatable yet always cool. Even when Jeff goes down rabbit holes of playing the original sample from a popular hip-hop or R&B song, it doesn't come off as chin-stroking music snobbery. It's clear that he's there to make sure people dance and have a good time first and foremost. He's got a magic combination of great taste and technical ability.

Chance Operators - The more I've created music, the more I've realized that every creative process has an element of chance. Even within the confines of deep intent and knowing very concretely what I want the architecture of a final piece to be--there's just never knowing what's going to tumble out of your mind--from a mumble into a lyric--at the moment you sit down to write. I've been enjoying reading about and using randomness and chance operations to further that end as I create sometimes. Brian Eno's "Oblique Strategies" cards, which are a deck of cards, each with a creative prompt on them, offers a good starting point, but there's lots of ways to engage with chance operators. I read recently that Mozart did some writing using dice to make artistic decisions.

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Vocation

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