Mitski on learning how things work

January 24, 2017 – Mitski is a multi-instrumentalist songwriter who's released four albums. Her most recent, *Puberty 2*, came out in July 2016. Her 2017 headlining/festival tour feels like the beginning of something even bigger. She has a great Twitter account.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2887 words.

Tags: Music, Beginnings, Success, Process.

I was curious about what you've learned from the last year as you've moved from opening spots to a headlining tour.

In my mind the transition has been very gradual. Maybe this past year's been flashy in terms of getting noticed in the public, but I'd started touring way before this. I'd been building little by little, and I made two albums in music school. People keep saying how sudden it is, how quick it is, but in my mind it's been a creeping build.

I'm grateful for it. I see a lot of other artists my age who put out their first record, maybe on a major label, and they shoot from playing to nobody, to 50,000 or 100,000 people. I don't know how I would have handled that.

For me, I've needed the process of learning how to do one thing, then learning how to do the next thing. Getting used to playing to 300 people, then 500 people, then 700 and 1,000. It's been important for me to be able to stay sane each step of the way.

I don't want to sound woe is me about this, but I have felt like I've just been kicking at a wall for years, then only now looking at the wall and seeing a little dent in it. I've never been able to skip any steps. I haven't been able to go to the next level without first clearing this level. I don't know if it's this way with other artists, but I've found that the music industry has been sort of wary about letting me step up.

I've felt like venues or promoters had to see irreproachable proof that I can sell out a thousand cap venue, three months in advance, before they allow me to play a 700 cap venue. To use the video game analogy again, it felt like in order to get to level two, I first had to prove that I can clear level three, and they'll allow me into level two. They really, really need to trust that you can sell those tickets before they let you play. I found that it doesn't seem to be the case with a lot of artists. There are some bands that are just welcomed into Webster Hall, and they haven't even sold out Bowery Ballroom.

Maybe that's the way it is for all artists who don't have that major label backing, or don't have that cred, I don't really know. It's really been a slow build in having to prove myself each step of the way. In the process I've learned a lot.

You recently tweeted about Hundred Waters, and how looking back you were thankful for what you learned from opening for them. What's been different for you as a headliner versus being an opener?

Back when I was supporting Hundred Waters, that was my first major support tour, and I had no idea what went into putting a tour together. I had no idea how much things cost, and how generous they were about having me on the tour. They let me stay in their tour bus for basically free for some of the tour when we were in Florida. They paid me more than what I now realize other bands at my level then would have been paid. They were really nice, and they were really accommodating. They let us keep some of our stuff in their tour van. At the time I didn't understand what went into promoting a tour. I didn't understand that people didn't just come to shows because they were in the area.

They were doing all this work that I didn't understand they were doing. I was just like, "Yeah, of course I'm on this tour, because I'm a musician. I'm a musician, I'm in a band, of course." Now that I'm headlining I'm like, "Oh, they did so many things that they didn't have to do for me, but they did." Now, when I have bands supporting me, I try to follow their example and maybe pay them more than they might be paid usually, or let them come in the van with us, and stay with us. Or just making sure that they have what they need.

Most people, especially people who aren't musicians, don't know what goes into a tour.

I think there's an almost switch-on-a-TV mentality about it. People see you in front of them, and don't really imagine what you did to get to right in front of them. I think that's why I still get DMs from kids in California, like, "Hey, come play in my basement." I'm just like, "No, I can't do that, because I would then have to take my whole tour crew, and then rent a van, and get your basement, and then not be paid, and play for four people." I think, like I said, there's this switch-on-the-TV mentality. Which is fine, because at the end of the day they don't have to think about us, we're the entertainers. They pay for a show, and they come to a show. They're not responsible to take care of us in that way.

What does it take to get used to playing a larger space? Is it learning how to inhabit a bigger stage, or is it more just getting used to playing in front of more people?

When you're in a small venue you can stay still, and you can still project an energy onto the people in front of you, because they can see your face. They can register those subtle energies. When you get into a bigger space you have to communicate with a thousand people in front of you, instead of these 50 people in front of you. You really do have to move around, and fill up the whole stage. Or you have to make sure you're very still to make a point of being still. Whatever you do, it has to be exaggerated because you look like an ant.

I'm not at the stadium stage where there's a TV screen projecting the very small expressions on my face. When it's a bigger venue, you have to get all those people's attention, but also you have to understand that it's easier for them to be distracted, and they're going to talk to each other, and they're going to maybe want to be drinking, and it's not going to be about you, it's going to be about their night. Sometimes they can't see you anyway, and you have to deal with that. You have to deal with being the entertainer, instead of the poet.

Some of it is just very logistical. Like you have to make sure you promote that much more. You have to make sure that that many more people come. You can't just post it on Facebook anymore. You have to do press. There's so much that goes into filling a room, and then keeping the people's attention in the room.

What are some things you know now that you wish you'd known when you were starting out?

It's been really good for me to learn that ultimately the audience doesn't care what you're going through on stage. They're there to see a show, and they're not even watching you—they're watching a projection of you that's in their brain. They're there to feel their own emotions, and sort their own feelings out. When you're having a bad time on stage, for example, they don't always know that, and they don't have to know that.

When I was starting out and I'd be having sound issues, I would talk about it, be in a bad mood, and make everyone feel it, when I don't have to. When I have bad shows and come off stage feeling really awful, there'd be audience members who'd be like, "That was great, that was an amazing show." I realized that—and I mean this in a good way—they don't care what you personally are feeling inside of you when you're performing. That's not to say that you shouldn't try to be happy on stage and give it your best.

What I'm saying is that it was really important and good for me to know that it's not about me. Then if I'm having a bad time on stage, it doesn't ruin the whole show for me. I feel like I can still go on with the show. It makes performing every night much easier, when I realize that it's not about me, it's about the audience. It's about giving them what they need. Especially because they're paying for tickets, I think I've developed a much better professionalism about performing and making sure people get their money's worth.

This isn't really specific to working in the music industry, but I learned that not everyone is out to fuck me over. That was a big discovery for me. I used to be really sharp and mean to my manager sometimes, when something wouldn't work out. My first instinct would be to think that they're trying to trick me into doing something. Or they're trying to fuck me over. I had this kind of really sharp sense of reflex. Slowly I've learned these people are working with me. If I just let them in and work with them, then we would all work better. It's not always the worst thing possible and it's not always personal.

Everyone’s actually trying to make this work. I think that was important for me to learn. In the same area, I also learned not to get always emotionally involved about everything, because it’s just exhausting. It’s a really crazy industry. It’s important not to take everything personally, because that can just wear you out.

I’ve learned that you don’t have to hang out after the show. You have to think about longevity. If you’re uncomfortable one night, you should do your best to be comfortable, try to sleep, try to take a shower, and take care of your body. Not speaking up about something or just going with the flow, and remaining uncomfortable can then exhaust you. Then it can keep you from performing well the next night, and the next following month.

It’s been really important for me to realize that I need to be clear about my boundaries. Make sure I’m comfortable, make sure I’m healthy. I need to stay on the road for the rest of the year. It might be more socially acceptable, for example, to hang out, and drink with everyone. If you’re not feeling it, you shouldn’t do it, because if you do it because you feel bad for not doing it, then you’re going to feel shitty for the rest of the next three months.

You tweeted, recently, about hoping to make a sustainable living at some point off your art, without having to be a figurehead or personality.

The thing is, I am a musician. I’m good at music. I’m not trained in politics. I don’t always know the right thing to do. Sometimes I say the wrong thing. I don’t want to be a role model, because I might do the wrong thing. If you actually listen to my lyrics you’d be able to tell, I’m not that great of a person. I think it’s a really heavy burden on artists these days, because not only do they have to be good at music, they have to be a lifestyle. They have to be a package. They have to be a leader.

They have to be political, and they have to “use their platform for good.” So much is expected of artists, when actually artists are usually the people who are the most fucked up, or just don’t know what to do with themselves. They don’t know what to tell people. I feel like I didn’t sign up to be a superhero, I just want to make songs.

I understand where that urge comes from, because artists are the people who are in public, and we look at the people who are visible. It’s natural, I guess, for people to see someone’s face all the time, and then wonder what they’re thinking. I should only speak for myself, but I don’t know how to make shit. I don’t know much about American history or politics. I just know how to write a good song about something I felt. I don’t think it’s wise to turn to me, and say, “What should we do?” I don’t know, I want someone to tell me…

With more people paying attention, when you sit down to write a song, does that new context shift the process at all for you? Or are you still writing the same way you’ve always been?

It’s funny, because after doing interviews year after year, it’s like now when I’m writing there’s this voice in my head that is always thinking of how to explain something. There are all these interview questions in the back of my head, kind of on an infinite scroll whenever I’m writing, thinking, “Well if you write that, you’re going to have to explain it. If you write that, you’re going to have to describe what the metaphor means.” There’s a lot more information running through my brain when I’m writing than when I was in college and finishing a song in 30 minutes.

I don’t know if that’s a bad thing, maybe that’s a good thing, because it makes me more critical. I don’t know, I still write. It’s just that the style of writing is changing. I think it’s kind of futile to try to hold onto the way you wrote before, when you’re not that person, and you’re not in that position anymore. It’s much better to figure out how you’re writing right now, and go with that. It’s much more productive that way anyway. You can’t go back to how you were before. You can’t go back to not knowing something.

What are some of the ways that you kind of disengage from the constant media churn and touring cycle?

I would like to know, honestly. What was it Drake said? “Lately I can’t sleep unless I take one.” I really relate to that, I feel like my brain is always on, or my brain is always called upon. I don’t look at my email for five minutes, and there’s 20 more emails. I decide, “Okay, today I’m going to take a break from emails, and I’m not going to engage.” Then I get a phone call from my manager, “Hey, I need you to look at this right now.” There’s no real escaping. I don’t know, I’m trying to figure it out. One thing that’s helped me is very cliché… but it’s really to be in the moment. For example, when you’re sitting and talking with your friends, it’s so helpful to just focus on that. Just do that for that moment.

Then after the conversation is over, you can check your email and the world will still go on. On tour I don’t have to always be thinking about the show, I can just go for a walk and look at the sights, be in that moment. Then go back to the venue, and then start thinking about the show. My brain doesn’t have to be thinking about everything, all the time. It just doesn’t, and it can’t function that way. I think that’s what I’m doing right now, but there are still moments when I don’t know how to take a break. Everything is always going. The thing about being an artist, is that no one needs you to be an artist. If you just stop working, that would be the end, no one’s going to tell you to keep going. They’re not going to demand more of you. If you stop, then it really stops. There’s that kind of panic in the back of your mind, I think. That’s why I always need to be working, because I’m not needed.

5 worst sounds, in no order by Mitski:

Screeching trains on Union Square’s uptown 4/5 track. Why does everyone pretend they’re okay and totally cool with this sound. Why must we all act so brave.

Metal utensils like forks and/or dentist tools gently scraping against teeth in your mouth.

Someone across from you eating cereal in milk, mouth closed, and breathing through their nose.

Someone across from you eating cereal in milk with bananas, mouth closed, and breathing through their nose. The bananas add an extra perversity.

The loud and mindless acoustic guitar noodling by that guy who literally will always pick up a guitar if he sees one and will not fucking stop playing while everyone’s trying to hear the conversation/accomplish the task at hand. Like oh my god can you just… hold on Maria - Trevor, can you fucking not for just one second please - sorry Maria, what were you saying?

Name
Mitski

Vocation
Musician, Songwriter

Fact

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Photo: Ebru Yildiz