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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2968 words.

Tags: Music, Art, Process, Adversity, Creative anxiety, Mental health, Independence, Collaboration.

On letting things go, learning positivity, and embracing the opportunity to reset

Musician and artist Lillie West on moving from visual art into making music, the ways in which taking good care of yourself makes you more creatively healthy, and what she's learned about herself and her process while quarantined

You started out as a visual artist, but dropped out of art school and became a musician. What was it like to make that shift to music, and what did you discover? Did you feel like investing so much time in your visual art was wasted, or do you feel that it's made its way into your music?

I've always done art in some capacity, or I've always had the urge to do it. I've had an urge that needs satisfying. I've always been really social, but when I moved to Chicago to go to art school, I just became more social. Painting is so solitary most of the time. You can do portraits of people live, but it's hard to convince someone to just sit in a room while you paint. When I moved to Chicago, there was a rich DIY music scene there, and I was really enjoying being a part of that, so it happened naturally, just shifting towards this way I could express myself—where I could involve other people in every part of the process. You're alone writing, maybe collaborating a bit with people as you write the music, and then you can perform it as many times as you want, sharing that experience with other people.

But I don't feel like all that time painting was a waste of time. It was wonderful and beneficial to me as a young person to have a creative outlet and a "productive" way to use my time. I feel like having art in any form is so therapeutic and meditative in a way that not everyone gets to access. You can't always get to that place if they don't have the time or resources. So, no, I don't feel like it was wasted at all.

Lately, I actually have found myself wanting to paint again. As music has become much more of a job and an emotional stressor, I've been craving returning to painting. The only reason I think that I stopped is because I started spending so much time doing music, and to a certain extent they do satisfy the same need.

If you're having a creative block or you're feeling anxiety about your work, is that what you generally will turn to, making art? I remember talking to Anohni about this: people had fewer expectations for her visual art, so she found making it less stressful.

It's something I've been exploring lately, because I had a major creative block for the past year, maybe a little bit more, and I've just started trying to work on that and free myself or unblock myself. Part of the creative block happening has been about me touring so much and things started happening inside me, thoughts about music and what I was doing, and I wasn't able to attend to them for a long time because I was focusing on day-to-day tour life, and it just got worse and worse. Now that I have all this free time, I'm really attending to it.

So I haven't until now turned to art, but that is what I'm doing a little bit. I'm trying to take care of myself creatively in whatever way that looks like, whether it be making visual art or, frankly, working on myself spiritually, because recently I've been feeling like when I work on myself spiritually as a person, it feels like I'm working on my art a little bit, too.

Has quarantine—where there is no touring, for instance—shifted the stressful feeling around music?

Definitely. I feel like, right before, I'd reached a breaking point with all of it, with all the darkness with music, and had been coming to a place of, "Something has to change, because I don't like the thing that is my favorite thing, or was my favorite thing, anymore." But, definitely. It's definitely productive again. I'm starting to concentrate on why that happened and how to change it, and return to the joy or the reason that I started doing it in the first place. I've had much more time and space to deal with that, and it's been productive in that way.

But music-wise... I know it sounds funny, but I'm only working on music when I want to, which is not that much at the moment. I also get up early now because I believe in magic morning energy. I don't know what it is; I guess your mind's empty. I think of all of my best ideas arrive as I'm falling asleep or as I'm waking up. It's some in-between dream reality. But I have been doing things here and there a little bit. I'm also realizing that it just doesn't matter. Like, if I stop making music for a while, that's fine. If it takes me six years to make a record, that's fine, you know?

For me, at least, quarantine is slowing everything down, which can be productive. The music industry has a fast cycle: finish the record, release the record, promote the record, tour, make videos to promote the tour. It's a machine that feeds on itself. I'm curious how the industry will have shifted when this is over, because I think when people have more time and realize what was harmful about constant touring or about the stress of needing to constantly feed the press cycle, they will maybe come out of this with a healthier mindset.

I think that this is going to change things for me a lot. I really let the game get to me, or maybe "let" is not the right word. It's so hard. It's so relentless. It's like, if you get these milestones, you get this feature, and you get this festival, and those are the markers of success and doing well, and this perception of yourself. I really let it get to me, or maybe I thought that I enjoyed it, almost. This time has been letting me reflect on the fact that I don't enjoy it at all. I find the game, and all this judgment, very suffocating to my creative energy.



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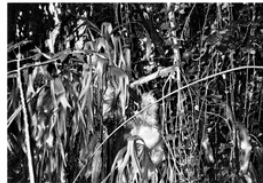


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I also think the last record I put out contributed to that feeling. I think of it as the first record, because for the actual first record I made, I didn't even know about record cycles or anything like that. I know it sounds insane, but, before The Lamb, I didn't know I was making a record when I made it. It was just, "Oh, we're recording these songs that don't even necessarily relate to each other, but whatever." So The Lamb is, in my head, sort of my first record. I didn't know what I was doing. In a lot of ways, people guided me, and that was very helpful, and I'm super grateful for that. But in other ways, I let things happen that were not true to myself, or I just thought, "Oh, so this is how you do it? This is what everyone's saying, this is how everyone does it, so I should." Going forward I will be doing things my way a lot more, and chilling out, and continuing to wake up early, and not have it be this relentless pressure.

How do you know when you've found a good collaborator? If you start and realize it's just a dead end, do you let it die, or do you try to find a way to make it work?

I absolutely let it die. I don't struggle with letting it die at all. I'll definitely try and harvest pieces of something that isn't working, whether it may be a lyric, a riff, or a whole chunk. But I've been lucky with collaborating so far, and it's been really fun—maybe because I'm so much more open in

collaborating than I am with myself. I'm totally open to the process of the other person or the other people, so I sort of let them lead the way in however way they're comfortable, because that's also why I do it: I want to know that about them. I want to experience that with them. It's exciting and interesting and different. All of my collaborations so far have been one-offs, and I think they've worked well every time, just because of that, just because I want to see how they do it, and want to know their process and things.

Is there something appealing about doing something once, before things get too nailed down and specific, and then moving on to another thing?

Absolutely. There's no pressure. One song, if it doesn't work out, it doesn't work out. The intention is never even to release it. Sometimes they do get released, and that's fun, and I like to share them... but, yeah, absolutely. I always fail when I anticipate the end too much. Not that this is a hard and fast rule, but it's almost like naming a band before it exists. You create this unnecessary expectation for yourself. When I do that, I fail. And this is sort of the opposite of that. It's like, "Hey, I have this tiny piece of music, would you like to mess with it, maybe?"

I interviewed Richard Hell for the site about collaboration. He was saying collaboration helped him get out of his head and to fight against creative tendencies. Do you find collaborating shakes things up for you? You can't get into too strict of a pattern if you're working with someone else.

Definitely. It's so easy for me to be so critical of myself while I'm making music. Halfway through a line, in my head I'll be like, "That's so fucking stupid," which is horrible. It's so unproductive and smothering of myself. But when I collaborate with someone else, I can unabashedly say to them, "This is amazing. You are so skilled. I love what you did so much, and therefore I love this song. I'm so proud of what we did together." I can do this in a way that I can never do with my own work. But, yeah, patterns, tendencies.

Do you feel like you have a very specific sound? For me, when I listen to Lala Lala, I think: "Wow, this is a broad palette of styles." You're the connective tissue, but it feels broad.

Thank you. I love to hear that. I do think I have tendencies. Like, the guitar looping thing and a certain tone is something that I always default to when I'm relaxed and messing around. But I will say, I want to be different every time, even if it's worse. I was thinking about this the other day. Because I'm making a record now, and I am delving into genres that I don't necessarily know anything about, like dance and pop, which is not what I've done in the past. I think I could make a record as good as *The Lamb* in the same exact style, like right now, and it would probably do fine. It would be like, "Okay, yes, she's made another indie rock record." But it's not interesting to me anymore, and I'm chasing these sounds and these genres that I don't know. I was like, "I'm afraid that I'm doing something that I don't know." Like, people who make electronic music are like, "Oh, well, there's this one big no-no that she's done," which I don't actually think exists. That's just in my brain.

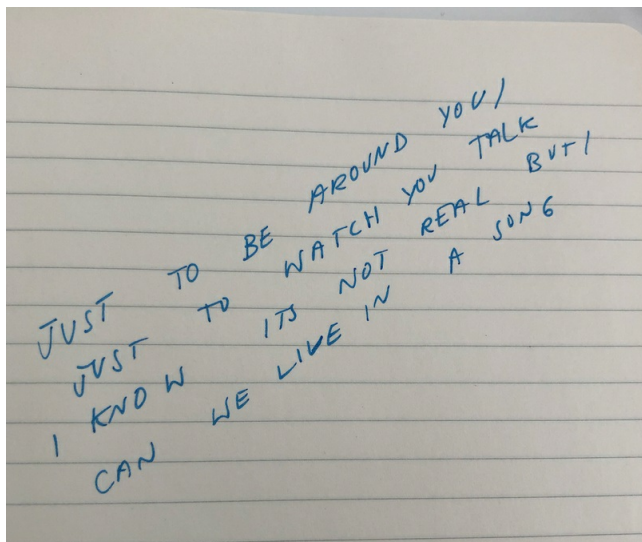


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I would much rather pursue things I haven't done before and be excited about it and love the finished product. I also don't even really believe in bad art as a thing. It's just a matter of taste. Someone expressed themselves, and they tried their hardest, and it's beautiful, even if I don't like it at all. I'd rather everyone hate it and I love it than make the same thing twice.

Is exploring different sounds and exploring different genres or different subjects how making music stays interesting to you?

I think it is learning more. I started playing music so late that, like I said to you, I really have no formal training and very little informal training. For me, personally, there's so much to learn—literally. Like, just chords. I don't know all the chords. So there's always something that that I can do, or there's always a program I can investigate. A music program, I mean, like Ableton. I used Logic, and am now I'm trying to make beats in Ableton, and I'm so bad at it. I'm just staring at this machine I have no understanding of. There's always something I can learn—pursuing things I don't totally understand, and making new sounds, or creating a limitation for myself. Like, "Okay, you have to use the Pocket Piano. That's the only instrument you can use. Let's see what happens." I have also been getting really inspired by other people's music again, which I wasn't for a long time.

What do you view as failure, and are you afraid of it, or is it something you embrace when you're trying to expand what you're doing? Do you see it as part of the process?

I've been trying to reprogram my brain in this department. It's hard, because to me, the ways that I've failed to myself, if someone else did that, it's not failure. It's as if the rules apply to everyone except for me. I'm trying to think about it all as the process now. That's really what I'm trying to do lately. I guess I do believe in failure, but I don't necessarily think it's bad. You learn from it. My attitude has shifted so dramatically recently into a much more positive place as I've been working on it. This is how I feel at the moment: failure exists, it's painful and disappointing, but I think that it's really valuable to learn from it and not be crushed by it.

How have you worked on gaining a more positive perspective?

I definitely only make music when it feels good. Lately I've been listening to myself, whether it be something basic like, "What do I want to eat? What do I want to see? What do I want to hear?," or bigger like "What do I want to experience with the limitations that I have right now?" And really listening—what do you want to do?—even moment to moment.

I seriously feel like there's a demon living inside of me that wants to destroy me. It's like I have a positive thought, and then the demon says something absolutely horrible. So now, as soon as I have the positive thought, I've been listening for that demon voice and trying to address where it's coming from and reversing it—not letting that be my default thought anymore, because it's so useless. I'm just trying to believe in myself.

I feel, to a certain extent if you're going to be an artist, you have to believe what you are doing is important, even if it's just to you, which is something that I never accepted before. I am just trying to convince myself that there's a reason that I do what I do, even if it's just to help me, and that's fine.

I got to such a dark place that I had to be willing to change everything, and I've been open in a way that I have never been before—open to hearing different opinions and reading different things, and open to spirituality in a way that I never was before. Like, I'm getting an aura cleaning on Saturday. I have no idea what it's going to be, but I'm just trying everything. I was so jaded, and now I really am open and welcoming that energy.

One thing about the present moment, is that when everything falls away that is so familiar and comfortable, it makes a lot of previous worries and complaints seem small. It's a good time to reinvent oneself, or to be open to possibilities. This kind of radical repositioning was unimaginable just a month and a half ago.

Yeah. No one thought this was possible—within myself, I really didn't. Obviously this is a horrible time, and I wish this wasn't happening to anyone. But it's definitely been eye-opening to see how stuck I was and how much you can change. I also do feel like my whole life has been like this—I reach a point where I think, "Ok, I've arrived at my beliefs. I've arrived at the way that I live." And then I'm proven wrong so royally. Every time that happens has been so humbling, and good for me as a person. It's good to be proven wrong.

Lillie West Recommends:

Youtube. Gear tutorials, cooking, language, yoga, work outs, science lectures, music videos, cartoons, orchestra performances, interviews, meditation. You can learn and experience so much on youtube for free.

Ambient music. Some of my favorite are Evening Star by Brian Eno & Robert Fripp, Water Memory by Emily Sprague, Beautiful World Bedroom by N Levine.

Giving a shit about the suffering of others. We have a responsibility to take care of each other with whatever resources, capacity, & possibility we have.

Lists. My favorite lists are: to do lists, gratitude lists, playlists, 10 positive things about yourself list (this is the hardest one).

"Tea Tree Therapy" mint toothpicks. You can get them at Whole Foods but they're hella expensive and that place is owned by Amazon. I buy them from Swansonvitamins.com and they're \$2.37 a pack.

Name

Lillie West

Vocation

Musician, Producer, Artist

Fact

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