

On the value of sharing space with other people



Musician and DJ Avalon Emerson discusses music bringing us together, having a creative hobby that's just for her, and being bad at taking time off.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2412 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Collaboration](#), [Focus](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Process](#), [Time management](#).

You very intentionally wanted to replicate the energy and dynamics of your live performances on your new album Written Into Changes. Can you talk about how exactly you did that?

Kind of the other way around, actually. The first album was very studio-y, kind of bedroom-y, a little bit quiet. For this album, I wanted to explore sounds that would feel powerful on a bigger stage.

What do you see as the value of live music these days? I'm asking from the perspective of, a lot of people consume music digitally and stream it, but maybe they don't go to shows as often.

I was just having a chat about how it feels like we're so atomized from one another in our everyday—and everything is so personalized, and everyone has their own algorithms of doom that we all scroll—that getting together in a real space is...it's one of the last places that we can get together around a shared experience. There's something to be said for sharing a room with a bunch of other people. If it's in a dance club, you're kind of in a nonverbal communal space, sharing the same sweaty air, and being reminded that we're pack animals.

When you say that, are you saying it from the perspective of you being on stage, you being in the crowd, or both?

Both. I see it a lot when I'm DJing. People need to get it out. There's a lot of pressure pushing down from every angle these days, and especially looking at your phone, you're assaulted by such a scale of horrific shit that it's important to be reminded that we're also existing in physical space and need to be communal with one another. I help facilitate that, I guess, as a DJ, and coming together for live music feels very similar, too.

To what extent do you see your recorded work, & the Charm, and your DJing as similar or different?

When I write music for the club, there's a function for it, and I'm also just more experienced with it. When I'm looking for music to DJ or I'm making music to DJ, I have a pretty clear idea of the thing it needs to do, and there's a structure that I know works, and there's a way that I DJ. I set my music up in a way that lets me do that. There's also an iterative process where I'll go through, like, 40 different versions of a dance song or an edit. I'll play it in Dublin, then I'll change it a little bit, and then I'll play it in London, change it a little bit, and I'll play it in New York, and then I'll go back to a previous version, and it's this live iterative process.

With these albums, it's very different in that I kind of go away for a couple years, make music with some people that I've worked with a lot before, and there's a confidence and a familiarity, just a pure joy doing all of that

and working with really brilliant studio musicians and expanding who I make music with. It's this closed-off secret garden, and then you build a visual world around it, and it's produced and the songs go through different versions, but it's kind of in private. And then, you have all these songs done, and you're kind of putting together the concept of the album and releasing this large project that's been cooking for a couple of years.

I think my taste, and the roots of what I like and how that affects the music that I make, inherently come from the same place. That's a little bit more abstract and hard to describe. It's more of an inspiration rather than a process difference, but there's a lot of things that are different and similar about both [the Charm and DJing]. I feel lucky that I have this side of my career that I like, DJing, that I still love to do, that I can do, and that it's not as beholden to album cycles.

When you talk about DJing, it sounds more intuitive and solitary. Do you find that, when you're pivoting away from the solitude of DJing to the more collaborative space of making the Charm albums, it shifts something in you?

I think music is inherently communal, whether it's the interaction of the stage or DJ booth with the crowd. When you're playing a live set, maybe you can have a spur of the moment and be like, "Let's play this song. It's not on the set list, but let's go." With DJing, it's very open-ended, and it's a conversation between the dance floor and my ideas of what I'm going to do from the DJ booth's perspective. It's more of a live muscle that I'm exercising when I'm DJing, and it's like a conversation. I'm constantly getting new music and filtering out some old songs that I'm not playing as much anymore. I'll have ideas and do some live re-editing, like different layering and experimentation live.

With the band, it's this building-up of a project and a work, then displaying it for everyone and hoping everybody likes it. There's different challenges and fun parts to each of those, but in the way that everything is all learning and all creative expression, I think it's tied together and orthogonally related, and there are connections that happen that you don't expect.

Did you have to learn how to have that conversation with the audience while DJing, or did it come naturally to you?

I think people use the shortcut of "comes naturally" with things that you like and things that you have an inherent drive to keep doing, and anything that you keep doing, you get better at. So much of making music is about listening to a lot of music and being conscious about what you like, why you like it, and what are the more zoomed-out traits that you're responding to about listening to those things and learning how to create them from the artist's perspective. DJing is also about paying attention, listening to the dance floor, and feeling where there's a pull toward a certain sound or vibe or whether something needs a change-up.

That's also why I like playing long sets in places that I feel comfortable in, like Nowadays or at Panorama Bar. Panorama Bar is usually four hours. If you're closing, it's around eight sometimes. Nowadays is also open-to-close, around eight hours. I played six on New Year's.

Imagine playing a live set for six or eight hours. It can't fully be planned, you know what I mean? The length and the breadth of it is a very open field to go play around in, and you want to make sure you have as many, to use conversation terms, words and turns of phrase to communicate with as possible, because there's so much music out there and it's always changing, it's always exciting. My friends are always sending me new things to road-test, and I'm always making things, and I want to try new things. You eventually get bored of yourself, so it's always a new experience to keep it feeling fresh and still connect with people while not repeating yourself.

You talked about being comfortable in Panorama Bar and at Nowadays. How do you get comfortable with a space, or if that's too hard to articulate, how do you realize you've become comfortable with a space?

I think those places have done a ton of hard-earned work to develop a set of expectations from the crowd and from DJs where, every time anybody DJs at Panorama Bar...their first time they go, they've been stressing about it, and they'll play their idea of their best set, and the people that go there expect the best, and they have very strong

and informed music tastes, but it's still primarily a place that people go to have fun and let loose. You can do that, and the club is open from Saturday night to Monday morning, so it's a long journey.

[As for] the idea of, when do I know that I'm comfortable? When I'm just way more excited to do it than anything, because the DJ booth sounds good, it feels good. The crowd is there for a good time, but I can play with a lot of different sounds and vibes, and I can go in a lot of different directions and know that the crowd is going to trust me, and they're not [passively] just going to the local club to get drunk, do drugs with their friends, or go see some DJ that they saw a five-second clip [of] on TikTok or whatever. You can do your thing there and experiment, and that's the dream, and I'm very happy that I have that for a lot of places.

The shortcut that I realized is that usually, right before I play Panorama Bar or Nowadays, I get an idea for a song or edit hours before I get there. I'm on the plane landing in Berlin like, "I'm going to make a crazy Kate Bush edit." I make it on the plane and then go play it at Panorama Bar. That happens a lot, and it's indicative of, "I'm excited. I get to debut something there."

On a time management level, since you're making studio albums and you're DJing, how do you balance it?

It's hard. I haven't played since New Year's, and I won't have played until late February. This is the longest time I haven't DJed in years, I guess since COVID. I'm not that amazing at blocking off time to not do anything. Even now, the reason I took it off is because I'm preparing the live show [for & the Charm]. I'm bad at doing time off, but I feel very comfortable with DJing. I have my processes of finding music, preparing my library, and making edits. This is kind of a machine that runs, and it gives me space to do these longer-range leaps of creative projects like making & the Charm albums.

I definitely relate to you saying you're bad at time off. A lot of The Creative Independent's readers are going to relate to that.

I know. Everyone is pushed from every angle. There's pressure everywhere. We all have to fucking hustle around. It's just late-stage capitalism.

Do you have any other sense as to why you're bad at time off? Because yes, it's late-stage capitalism, and yes, it's nobody getting enough money for the work they do, but why else specific to you do you feel that you're bad at taking time off?

I don't know. Maybe something happened in my development, or it's just the way I'm wired. I think that the world is a very interesting place, and I wish I had many lifetimes so that I could get good at all the things I want to get good at.

Recently, moving up here [to the Catskills], the house we live in had a garage, and it came with a table saw and a workbench, so I was like, "Okay, I'm going to start making things out of wood." That's my downtime stuff that I like to do, because it's also just like music. It's like a skill and an art combined, and there are techniques that you can learn, techniques on YouTube, but it kind of takes a while to develop them, get good at them, then use them for your specific project.

I think it's important for me because it's a hobby that I'm not ever trying to be professional at. It's just for me. I'm making my little lamps and whatever, and I'm not going to have to push them in the open marketplace, and I'm not trying to be a woodworking influencer. It's just for me, and I need to go out in my garage and listen to music and make some sawdust every once in a while. That's a very restorative experience for me.

With & the Charm, Bullion was your main co-producer, and that's also true of Written Into Changes, but it has two songs that Rostam is also a co-producer on. How do you know it's time to bring in another collaborator when you've already got a reliable one?

I love working with Nathan [Jenkins of Bullion] so much, and I hope to for as long as we both can, but...I guess I

started & the Charm making music and being like, "I want this to be collaborative." All of my favorite and, I think, the best artists in the world are good at collaborating. David Bowie, Björk, whatever, right? You can create something that's greater than the sum of its parts by working with other people.

If they're fun people and they're interesting, and you can sit in a room and talk for hours about different influences or just chat about—I'll talk about reverb for hours with anybody, and making music with somebody else is like opening up the interiority of lyrics and talking about kind of intimate relationship things or heavy life headspace realizations. That's why we make music. Connecting with an audience is one thing, but connecting with the people that you're making music with is the function of music also.

That's everything I wanted to ask you today, but if you have anything else you want to say about creativity, or anything more you wanted to add to any of the questions that I asked that you didn't get to say when I first asked them, feel free to take a moment.

Being creative is an output of learning, and that is where it happens, so anything that can cause you to learn will cause you to be creative. Honing those muscles is the same thing as being creative: learning, gaining new skills, woodworking, writing code, being a better communicator.

Avalon Emerson Recommends:

Orchestra Of The Eight Day - At The Last Gate (1984)

Modded 5th gen iPod Video

Suizan Japanese Wood Pullsaw

American Movie (1999)

Elta Music Solar42N Drone Synthesizer

In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the World It Made by Norman F. Cantor

Name

Avalon Emerson

Vocation

musician, DJ

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Avalon Emerson by Lillie Eiger