

On leaning into your weirdness

Musician and label founder TOKiMONSTA discusses prioritizing love over careerism, picking up the phone when creativity calls, and creating a jumping-off point for young artists.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2255 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Adversity](#), [Day jobs](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Health](#).

A recent press release I got about *Eternal Reverie* said that the album has become your way of commemorating a friend, and that you stepped away from your art to take care of this friend as she was dying. Can you talk about how a work of art can take on new meaning after you've completed it?

This album is fraught with a lot of complicated feelings. At the beginning, I went in with so much creative energy and created space for it. I paused my touring, which I've never done before, just to finish this album. Once I was in the home stretch, my best friend was diagnosed with cancer, and the album did mean something different. It's meant something different at different phases of my life over the last year. I came into this album bright-eyed, and then my friend was sick. Upon her diagnosis, I was like, "I am going to drive her to her chemo appointments, play her the album as it's being made, get her feedback and see what she thinks—use it as a moment to keep her happy and keep the mood light."

Fast forward maybe just a couple months: her condition changed, her prognosis changed, and her cancer—which was already very aggressive—metastasized. I was notified by my friend's doctors that she would not have very much time left. This was right when my album was going to come out, maybe two weeks before. We had already announced this massive tour. It was 30 dates, give or take, in the continental U.S. I had to cancel all of that and postpone the album. At that point, the album went from being this new exploration into music, to something I used as comfort to keep my friend in good spirits, to this very important thing I had to push to the side to do something even more important that I wouldn't be able to ever do again. And that was to take care of my friend and shepherd her into the next life.

There are so many parts of me that didn't want to see this through... But now this album has become a therapeutic process in my own grieving, and it is triggering, in a way, to constantly talk about my friend dying. Every time I have these conversations, I'm actively very sad. But it's important. It's helping me move forward. It's forcing me not to be stagnant in the sadness I was existing in and still exist in. Life goes forward, and music goes forward, and my music is pulling me and encouraging me to look forward.

I'm sorry for your loss—this is an awful thing to happen. I'm sure the decision to postpone the album's release was not something you had to think about much, but were there any doubts about how it would impact your career?

Professionally, postponing this album and this tour could [have been] very devastating, because I'd already taken time off from touring. A lot of relevance in the music scene is maintained through active touring, and I would be pushing off all of this for even longer, and in the meantime, everyone could just forget about me. That's a common thing that musicians have to deal with. If you're not out in the ether, you'll disappear into it.

I was concerned, of course, about the repercussions of this decision, but careers come and go. If anything, I

could figure out a new job, but I will never get my friend back. It was either: I might lose my job, or my friend is going to die, and she'll not have me next to her. I chose the latter and chose to take care of my friend so that in her last days she could be surrounded by the people she loved the most, and that was worth everything. To shepherd her on that last journey was really hard. I don't regret it at all.

[*Eternal Reverie*] is a testament that it's okay to put things on pause, even if you think it's really scary. When you make the right decisions, things will still work out... Life throws a lot of curveballs at you. One of the beautiful things about being human is the ability to somehow pick yourself up and move forward despite all things.

This isn't a decision anybody should have to make—"Do I go and tend to my friend who's dying?"—because the answer, on one hand, is always yes. But on the other hand, we live in a society where there is also career to consider.

I feel like, maybe, in certain kinds of more traditional working jobs, there could be a way to be like, "Hey, I need to take a leave of absence," and you know your job will be like, "Okay, we'll give you this time. You'll come back afterward." The music industry is not like that. One wrong move and you don't really have a job tomorrow. But music is something I love and I do because I love it, and my friend is someone I love. If I just prioritize love on top of everything, things will work out as they should.

It's tough. My friend was young, and you don't expect to lose your friend so soon and so tragically. It's sobering, and it just shows you how finite life is—to live each day graciously, and to remember that tomorrow's never guaranteed, so we want to make the decisions that bring us joy as often as possible.

Earlier, you mentioned that when you first were working on *Eternal Reverie*, you paused your tour to work on it. Are you usually writing songs while you're on tour? If so, what does that look like for you?

Typically, I'm always working on music while I'm traveling. And it's so feasible. I have Ableton on my laptop; I have all my sessions on my laptop. I am someone that typically has all my VSTs [Virtual Studio Technologies] and plugins also native on my system, and that gives me the power to make music literally anywhere. Whenever creativity hits, you've got to answer the phone. I love the creative and technical climate that we live in where we can do things like that. I can make music out on my patio. I can go on vacation, hotel rooms, airplanes, et cetera.

However, that does mean you're constantly distracted. Something I've never been able to do is to create an album [while] giving it space and just working on the music. That was an experiment I tried out this time, where I took off six months from touring heavily and just made music. It was really liberating, and it was nice and therapeutic. I feel like that bolstered me and my resilience, happiness, and mental health to be able to deal with the rest of the things that happened in the year for me. If I was burnt out from touring and then also had to deal with the loss of my friend and all these other things, I don't know how I would've fared.

When you're at home, not touring and not in these environments that aren't your environments per se, do you find that distractions come up? If so, how do you deal with them there?

Oh, so many distractions. I'm in front of my TV. My friends are calling me to go and hang out. There's all these social events, new restaurants. I want to cook at home. [My] new ADHD hobby I've picked up is modeling clay. The distractions exist no matter where I am. The one thing that changes when I work from home is that my environment stays the same, so there's actually something that stays steady. And even though I'm distracted by things—and I'm very distractible—as soon as I want to make music, I have all my tools around me to make that happen, and there's less of a barrier of entry. I don't have to find a table or whatever. Even if I'm distracted, I have many surfaces and areas to create, and there's the comfort of being in my pajamas and at home.

I've never looked at music like a 9-to-5. I'm not the kind of musician that can create like that. Many of my peers set hours for themselves. They wake up at 9:00, they have their coffee, and from 10:00 to 6:00, they just work on music. I am incapable of doing that... If I had a regular job, I would've been fired so fast.

When you find yourself working on something for 14 hours, how do you make that happen?

It's kind of a spark, and it becomes this intense focus. I might be sitting on my sofa and have Ableton open; I'm like, "Oh, I have this tiny idea, let me just get that out." Well, that tiny idea becomes an even better idea. And then, I start getting excited about the song and keep working on it. I cancel my plans for the evening. And fast forward, it went from being working on my sofa at 4:00, to 2:00 in the morning and I'm still in the dark. I haven't eaten, drank water, or gone to the bathroom. That intense focus becomes all-encompassing, and it's all because I'm so excited about what I'm working on.

When I regiment myself into [keeping] a schedule, I can make music, but nine out of 10 times, I am not really happy with what I'm making. I have to let that inspiration feed upon itself and get into those areas where I do want to keep working, and those are the songs I'm the most excited about.

I want to ask you about Young Art Records because it's been active for about a decade now. How has giving other artists a platform fueled your own creativity? What artistic itches has the record label scratched for you?

It boils down to why I make music. I make music because I love music, and it's been such a part of my life, even when I was a super young age. The label gives me a way to flex that creative muscle that allows me to pick up artists. Having the label allows me to foster innovative and underrepresented voices... I felt like I had no role models as a musician [growing up].

These people have so much talent, and a lot of the artists I've signed may have been on major labels or other labels in the past, but they felt underserved. I want Young Art to be this jumping-off point for these artists. It's not a huge moneymaker for me. It's not a big business venture for me. It's something I do to help uplift musicians I really believe in and to exercise that creative muscle, that part of me that really loves finding amazing music.

Can you talk about collaborating with featured artists to get your songs to a state where you think they're finished?

I like to use vocals as a layer in the song, and that's what differentiates a song that's *for me* versus a song that's *for someone else*. I'll also produce songs for other artists, but the highlight is really them. In the context of my music, what I want to create is an amazing song, not just an amazing vocal performance. There's a lot of vocal production that goes into it. Any time I've worked with the featured artists, their topline isn't just on it—I mix them into the production of the track. Their vocals are now a part of the track. [I] create this whole composition that is not just a typical pop song, even if it has elements of that. If you take any of my songs and put them on radio, they might not work because it's not exactly the correct formula...

In terms of knowing when a song is done, I have a very good sense of completion when I write any song. When I get vocals from an artist, after I have those vocals in hand, that's when a lot of the magic starts. That's when I start cutting up the vocals, processing them, changing a little bit of the production, or rearranging the sequence.

At the end of these conversations, I always like to say, if there's anything more you want to say about creativity or your process, go for it.

Many times, there is a pressure to be a certain way or to stick to a certain thing, especially if you're an artist that's known for a certain motif. I believe you should follow your gut. When I started off, people thought my music was really weird. And now, my music has become more conventional because what was left-of-center has now become center... It's good to be weird and lean into your weirdness, because you're going to be the one that shapes the landscape of music in the future.

TOKiMONSTA recommends:

The video for "[Windowlicker](#)" by Aphex Twin (1999, dir. Chris Cunningham). Classic brain scratcher, uncanny,

hypnotic, and permanently burned into my brain.

Björk's song "Wanderlust." Like stepping into an ancient future landscape.

"The Music Scene" by Blockhead. Classic psychedelic mind melt, but animated.

Flying Lotus' "Never Catch Me ft. Kendrick Lamar." Consciousness after death and the hidden beauty of the unknown.

Daft Punk's Electroma. Robot existentialism.

Name

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Vocation

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