

On having something to say



Musician and visual artist Ginger Root discusses learning everything because you want to and have to, and knowing when to stop.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2654 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Beginnings](#), [Failure](#), [Independence](#), [Process](#).

One of the things that fascinates me about Ginger Root is the lore behind the music videos—you're building lore as you roll out an album. Why do you do this, and how does it tie into your creative process?

I went to film school, and I wanted to use another skill to mix with music. With the state of the internet, as a musician or really any artist, it's not just your one art form anymore. You have to be multifaceted to break through the static and noise of millions of other people competing for people's attention.

I chose to build lore because I thought it'd be funny and an interesting way of further deepening the music, and I really appreciate that some of the bands I listened to in college, like Kero Kero Bonito, Toro y Moi, or [Japanese Breakfast](#), have such a distinct counterpart to not just their band and their music, but also to themselves as artists. Michelle [Zauner of Japanese Breakfast], it was a book, and Toro, it was his design, and Kero Kero Bonito is always remixing other musicians. I wanted to do something outside of music and flex the visual skills I learned in college.

At what point did you realize your way of building lore was successful? Some of the view counts I've seen on your YouTube were staggering to me for an artist who wasn't signed to a prominent record label until their most recent album [2024's [SHINBANGUMI](#)]. I was genuinely amazed that "[Loretta](#)" [from 2021's *City Slicker* EP] has 19 million views.

When Ginger Root was kind of coming up through the ranks, me and my manager were always dreaming of that flash-in-the-pan moment, and this goes into the lore-building. If you get your flash in the pan, are you able to do anything with it? Can you direct that momentum and power outside that one singular flash? If I got that whole opportunity of one of my songs going viral in the first couple months of Ginger Root, I wouldn't have had the substance behind the project to have people engaged and want to dig deeper.

Because I was building all this lore around "Loretta," and even before then with all the music videos—they all had stories, and while they weren't connected at the time, we were building this Ginger Root aesthetic. It was interesting to see people be like, "There's a whole body of work I can really sink my teeth into because 'Loretta' hooked me in, and now, I'm strapped in and ready for the ride." That's what I wanted to expand upon moving forward with *Nisemono*, the next EP, and then *SHINBANGUMI*.

What you said about there needing to be substance before you can have that internet breakout moment is such an interesting insight. To what extent do you have to resist the pull to create internet content just to create it, versus knowing what you're creating is authentic to Ginger Root?

This is something I've struggled with throughout this album cycle, especially working with a bigger label. The pressure is not directly from them, it's really the internet's pressure of creating consumable, disposable

content versus something with more substance. It's this fine line of doing the content grind for more followers, and then not paying attention to that so you can nurture your own fan base. I definitely got lost in having to make short-form content on a number of platforms and cut down my videos for special formats to only the hookiest part.

I really attached my value to the numerical statistics of whether a TikTok did good, which is terrible, and it makes me feel awful, and it's something I still struggle with. There's a way to reach a larger audience [via] short-form content, but the interesting thing is, if you can hook them in but you have nothing to say, they're not going to stick around for a very long time.

As for building a substantial body of work behind [SHINBANGUMI], if you listen to "No Problems," the single off this record, and you're like, "This is a catchy song" and that's all you take away from it, totally fine by me. But for the people who are like, "Wait, this guy was fired from a fake Japanese TV station? What is this? I've got to look into it," and they realize all the music videos connect, they become a superfan. And so it's like, why not provide those two opportunities to build the casual fan and the superfan? While it's very time-consuming, annoying, and creatively very frustrating, it's the game artists have to play, and I'm trying my best to play it. Whether I'm winning or not, I'm not sure, but it's a rule nowadays that I recognize exists.

Speaking of your videos, a very notable thing about them is the aesthetic—you shoot them all with original bubble-era Japanese cameras, which is a very specific and intentional choice. Why does this choice feel so important, and how is your visual aesthetic inseparable from your music?

During COVID, I couldn't tour. I couldn't go back to the film industry—that was my previous work before I did music full-time. I had all this free time and was like, "I'm going to learn a language," and I chose Japanese because I always wanted to learn Japanese. I was a huge fan of Japanese music growing up. I watched anime as a kid. I did language learning purely through immersion.

I was watching all this content from bubble-era '80s Japan, whether it was interviews with my favorite artists, performances, TV shows, dramas, movies, anime. I was watching a crap-ton of that all day long, to the point where I was able to pick up words and phrases, and then after four years of doing it every day, I was able to learn the language and become proficient.

Because I was watching all this media from that time, I was really influenced by that, and as an Asian-American, I didn't want to superficially homage that culture. I know people can put Japanese characters like Katakana on a shirt and just be like, "Look how cool this looks." But all that stuff, I didn't want to do that. Japanese media and learning Japanese kept me going during COVID when I couldn't do music, I couldn't tour anymore, I couldn't do Ginger Root, I couldn't do film.

I wanted to encapsulate the Japanese aesthetic as respectfully and accurately as I could while also giving my own perspective on it, because Japanese music from the '80s is heavily influenced by '70s Western music. Having grown up with both Western '70s music and then '80s Japanese music, I'm kind of remixing their remix, which is a really interesting perspective. I wanted to make sure, and kind of as a test, can I recreate that era in America with all the right gear and everything? It was a long journey of trial and error, a lot of hours spent crate-digging on YouTube and searching old TV shows and watching a lot of that stuff, and I got two things out of it. One, Ginger Root got an aesthetic that everyone seems to like, and two, I became fluent in Japanese.

Was Ginger Root taking off on the internet ultimately what allowed you to leap from film to music full-time?

Yes, absolutely. I started Ginger Root in college. I played house shows, and I was freelancing doing post-production in film and TV. I did music videos for bands too. There came a point where I was working on contract for this one company while doing Ginger Root, and our first big opening act tour offer came in, and I told my boss, "Hey, I'm going to be gone for two weeks. Is that okay?" And they were supportive of it, and then, we did that tour, it went really well, and things started to pick up, and I was like, "You know what? I want to try to do this full-time."

That was right around COVID starting, and then COVID happened, so I was really weirded out, but with *City Slicker* taking off, we started getting offers to tour again once the world started to open up, and that's when I was like, "Yeah, I want to do this full-time." I will say, yes, my editing freelance jobs did pay for merch to be made, and airline tickets to fly, and gear and all that type of stuff.

Ginger Root has very low overhead, because my toxic trait is that I want to learn everything. When I had to design merch, I didn't have any friends who could do it, nor did I have the money to hire someone to design a shirt, so I decided to try design myself. Same with when I was trying to learn how to record music. I didn't have anyone to help me out, so I just learned how to record. I learned how to play bass. I learned how to play keys because I didn't really know anyone who could, or I couldn't compensate someone to help me out with my own project. And now it's a blessing and curse where I get to, but also have to, do everything.

Has your motivation to try new things been there from day one, or is it something you developed more as an adult where it was like, "I'm really drawn to music and I want to be as DIY as I can"?

I always wanted to figure out how to keep myself entertained, so it might've come from that. When I was a child, I tried to do stop-motion with my webcam. I would do parodies of *Mythbusters*. I started a YouTube channel because I wanted to be a YouTuber, all this type of stuff. And then, my parents gave me a guitar and I wanted to record songs. Then I got really into the gear aspect of things.

I was very curious because everything looked so fun, and Ginger Root, it's such a fun project. It's not fun 24/7, but it is, at the end of the day, something I really enjoy doing, and that is the North Star—the fun of making something and trying something. Ginger Root is the result of tons of failure and tons of trial and error, but very strategic changes after each failure.

I want to rewind a bit to your transition into working in music full-time. Has being able to focus on music full-time changed your creative process?

Knowing that I don't have anyone else to report to, like a job or a boss or whatever, was interesting at first, because I was like, "I just wake up and do whatever I want." Because I get to wear so many hats, when I'm sick and tired of mixing drums, I look forward to when I can stop that and start designing merch. Then, when I'm sick and tired of working in [Adobe] Illustrator, I'm so excited to start writing video scripts and start making promos and social media content. Once I'm sick of uploading my own TikToks, I'm like, "I want to go on tour. I can't wait to go out on the road." It's this really weird and vicious, but also harmonious, cycle that happens. Time moves alarmingly fast because of it, but they say time flies when you're having fun.

To zone in a little more on the actual songwriting process, how do you start a song, if there's a way you start it every time? I realize it could vary.

It does vary, but as the years have gone by, I've fallen into a routine, which is good, and I'm weirdly ready to break a routine right after I've found it. My process is either, I'm just messing around on some type of instrument and something sounds cool, and then I stick with it, I'll voice-memo it, and then, if it survives the voice memo round, I'll start making demos, and it'll go through the ranks of being fully produced. At other times, I'll be listening to a song and just be like, "What if I wrote a song like that? Can I write that song?" And then, it ends up becoming not that song at all, which is kind of nice. I'll be like, "Oh, I want to write this Chaka Khan-sounding song," and then it ends up becoming a Paul McCartney tune. It's really weird, but they all go back to my influences, the stuff I was listening to growing up.

In terms of a greater piece of work like *SHINBANGUMI*, I had something like 30 kind of finished demos and then pared it down to what sounds like it could go together, what reflects this vague world and storyline that I want to communicate in this record. It's this tug and pull of narrowing it down from story to demo to sound to track listing, to sound to demo to vibe to aesthetic, and then it becomes the record.

How do you know a song is done?

One answer is when I'm sick of it almost. I'm like, "Yeah, this is good enough." I'll take a break from it. I'll be in the studio trying to cook up something even better. I'll be adding stuff. I'll take a breather, and I'll come back and I'll hit play. I'm like, "That's pretty good. Yeah, it's done." You can get so lost in the sauce when you're in the studio making something, which is really interesting.

But the other point, which happens sometimes—and this is not a big ego thing or whatever—but sometimes, I'll be making something, and I'll sing a harmony or write a bass fill or something, and I'm weirdly emotionally moved to tears, not because I think it's so good, but it triggers something in me that reminds me of music I had the same reaction to... It's like when I first heard the opening chord to "Hard Day's Night" or the [Yellow Magic Orchestra] version of "Tighten Up." I was just dumbfounded by how cool that was.

For some reason, there'll be times when I'll be in the process of mixing. I'll listen to the whole song. I'm like, "Wow, how did that happen?" It's weird to talk about without trying to sound like, "Man, my song's awesome." No, it's just this really weird thing that happens when you're alone in the studio for 10 hours, you haven't eaten anything, and you finally play the song back and you're like, "Holy crap, how did that work?"

That's everything I wanted to ask you today, but at the end of these conversations, I always like to say that if there's anything more you want to say about creativity in any way, shape, or form, go for it.

Creativity is really weird. One day, you think you're the best thing to ever walk with the face of the earth and your art is awesome, and then the next day, you're like, "You know, I should just become a schoolteacher or something and stop this." I've had that multiple times.

For [SHINBANGUMI], making these songs, my environment really influenced and helped. I used to write everything at my little DIY studio, but I had the opportunity, with all the touring to Asia and stuff, to spend some time in Tokyo, and I did some songwriting and recording there, some DIY stuff. The environment really shapes creativity.

Ginger Root Recommends:

[A Dream is All We Know](#) (album)

AIR - [CON BOOM BOOM ONESAN REPUBLIC](#) (album)

[Paper Mario and the Thousand Year Door](#) (game)

[Oi! Handsome!](#) (j drama)

[Nodame Cantabile](#) (anime)

Name

Ginger Root

Vocation

musician, visual artist (Ginger Root)

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