

On being a lifelong learner



Musician Angela Autumn discusses staying true, managing anxiety, and expressing gratitude for what you can do

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As told to Jeffrey Silverstein, 2045 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Production](#), [Success](#).

What impact did hearing music in church have on you as a young person?

In the tradition that I grew up in, which was Catholicism, some people are very uncomfortable with sound and with singing. My family and my dad, we always sang. It definitely could have been embarrassing, but it wasn't for me. I'm not going to tout myself as a purveyor of Christ in this interview however, I feel that was the first time that I was ever truly moved by the spirit, emotionally moved by sounds or even just by elderly members of the community and witnessing the flow of life. I didn't have a lot of social exposure as a kid, so going and just hearing music was super powerful.

Did you have examples of what it looked like to be a working artist in your community?

There was a guy in my hometown, named Eugene, who was a Blues musician, and we would always go and see him, and he would just be playing "Mustang Sally" and "Get Your Mojo Working."

My mom's friend was a visual artist. We would go to her house and she would have a bunch of paint, her name is Sisal. She'd have a bunch of paintings just all over. It was always messy and disjointed, but it was cool to witness. My mom, too. She had a didgeridoo and she would make instruments out of gourds. It was cool to see her with the plants. She grew them and then she would dry them and be very creative with them. I didn't necessarily have a musician mom, but she was into the idea of it.

You were invested in visual art before taking on music full time, is that correct?

Yeah, I loved visual art as a teenager. However, when academics got more rigorous, it just was impossible to spend that much time in an art studio because they put you through the wringer nowadays. So yeah, I feel like from 17 to 24, it was difficult to hold onto painting.

How did you find yourself enveloped in and performing roots music?

I'm just such a lifelong student that I think everything I consume has a place in my music, and I really do care deeply for traditional music. I think it makes me a good person to keep around because in the future, there are even little nuggets of that in my music. It's a continuation in a way. I don't know if all of the younger folks at the shows can make that connection, but that's where I'm coming from fully, because I made that connection to that music and it changed me permanently.

How did you approach learning to play banjo?

There are many levels of banjo playing. I don't think I'm at a high level, but I have spent a lot of time over the years studying. I started playing when I was 19, and so it's been 10 years and it takes a really long time. I've been on the phone with Adam Hurt or with Vic Furtado trying to figure out tunings to songs. I've sat across from old guys from North Carolina, and I've sat across from banjo teachers in my hometown when I first got the instrument and had them show me what they knew. With the limited access that I've had to people, I feel like I've gained a lot just from sitting across from them and watching them. Even just being around them and just not being intimidated by the instrument you're picking up and then figuring out things on your own. Clawhammer style is adapted by Pete Seeger for the Greenwich Village revivalists, for them to have a little book to give people. But clawhammer banjo is a traditional style that comes from accompanying oneself and singing in a solo style.

Did you break it down into specific skill sets, like just focusing on the right hand, etc?1.

I feel like I had a little bit of an advantage because I have played in open tunings my whole life, which comes from the blues. And with that experience, that is the same tuning as banjo. And so I really just mentally transcribed the chord shapes to the banjo and started figuring out basic songs. I didn't have right-hand technique at all. My friend Victor Furtado, is an amazing banjo player who won the Steve Martin Award several years ago, we were living together, and Victor is such a stellar, amazing banjo player that I look up to so much, and he would kind of joke like, "Oh, Angela's doing her folk punk thing." I kind of liked that actually, I'm proud of that.

Did it impact your songwriting at all?

Yeah, it's just very fun to write songs on banjo. I think what it unlocked for me is the form of old-time, which is AABB. That form is cool to use in songwriting, or the myth that we need a chorus and a chorus and a bridge. Whereas old time, it's just verse, verse, verse, riff over and over and over and over and over. It's such a cool paint tool to use. I don't have music theory, so it's fun to just play around. That was something that I thought would prevent me from communicating with others. I also think there's a lot of dos and don'ts, but we all are just speaking a musical language.

How have you built up your confidence around live performance?

Well, I started performing solo when I was 12, and people have just been so kind to me. They've been so gracious. When you get up there and you practice so much for years and years and years, and you have all of the time under your belt, it just feels like, like I don't really get nervous at this point. I try to set myself up the best that I can with my material. If there's really something that's just not dunking, it's going in the trash.

How do you know if it was a "successful" performance?

I think it's just if I still have energy at the end of the performance, because if I feel completely demoralized and physically very aged, then I know something very bad just happened. I've been researching and studying that, and I think we're just always in different energies all the time. The planets or the weather or whatever.

What does it look like for you when you sit down and write?

I don't really like scheduled writing. It feels too pressurized. But it is good to have a writing practice. Lately I built a loft bed in this nook in my house, and for a bunch of days I would get my coffee and then I'd come home and I would sit up there, have a notepad and be like, "What am I working on?" And just try to pick up maybe an unfinished song or see what's new. And it's really helpful to have buddies to get you stoked and share with. I don't know if it's very "Artist's Way" vibes, but I would just sit up there and try to have a routine, the same time every day with my incense, my window open and just my little space.

How do you decide which of those unfinished ideas to pick up on?

I guess if it's true to who I am at the moment, there is a resonance when you say something, when you speak it. I love my mom, she's my hero. And so if I write a song inspired by my mom right now at this stage, that's

important, for me to honor her femininity, her life. That's going to be one that I'm like, "I want to sing this. This is meaningful." But if I'm writing about an old love or something egotistical, that's just this idea of what I'm supposed to be, maybe not that one right now, maybe save it.

How do you know when a song is finished?

My producer Isaiah, really helps me with my anxiety surrounding songs because I would bring that issue up to him, knowing when an idea is finished, when we were preparing the next album, which is called *Believer*. I would say, "But I wish I would've sang this differently. I have this other alternate line." And he would say, "It's okay, Angela. You can always sing it differently live." He would say, "You can always change it, Angela, and you don't have to worry." He said, "There's nothing bad about recording it, even if it wasn't exactly perfect." I think all artists say that. Even Joni Mitchell says, "I wish I would've done that differently." I try to get my work done and not hate it when it's done.

How do you feel right before and after you release an album?

The most important time was when we just finished an album in February and I brought it home to my home town in western Pennsylvania to my mom's house. One of my favorite things has always been playing music for her. I played her the record and she said, "That's pretty good." And that was all that I needed. That was the most joyful moment that I've had. Everything after that is just icing on the cake because my mom has a real sense of what's going to do something and what's bad.

You just need one person in your corner.

It does matter. Before I started working with my manager, Ash or my producer, Isaiah, there was nobody telling me what I was doing was good. In fact, they were trying to change it. They would have hyper critiques. And I was like, "What am I doing wrong?"

Considering we're sitting in a green room, what is your relationship to touring like?

Well, everything is a sacrifice. When you're touring, obviously you're putting your health and safety at risk more than people may acknowledge. But it is a great way to reach my fans in a personal way. That is incredibly important to me.

Any routines or tour rituals?

Sometimes I like to take a shower and dry off naked in the sun. That's my requirement, I don't care who's around. I'm at this festival and I need to sneak over here and dry off because if I don't it's literally going to dampen my chi and I'm more susceptible to being ill. You have to be on point. I don't let my hair stay wet for too long because I don't want to get sick. For a while I was doing 200 squats every day because you don't want your body to break down.

Do you see a link between physical activity and songwriting or creativity?

Yeah, working out. I feel like it's supportive to my literal diaphragm. When I'm working out, sometimes I'll be more inspired to write because I feel good and, almost safe. I feel like it's a real privilege to get to do that, to get to take care of our bodies in 2025, whereas my grandparents didn't get to. They just worked two jobs and raised their kids. It is such a privilege to have access to knowledge about our bodies. I do think that lends itself to creative work in general.

What is your relationship with social media like these days?

It's hard to be present with the people around you that obviously care a lot that you're showing up when you're just trying to document everything. So I would prioritize being present with my physical surroundings before that.

I think it's important to stay true to that and find success in spontaneous behaviors and spontaneous creativity. But it's not a must for me. I don't like to do scheduled musts, so that's where I'm at.

Angela Autumn recommends:

don't be afraid to go on a quest and switch up your scenery.

believe the intuitive hits that you feel and verbalize them.

accept kindness with no strings attached.

provide goodness in others lives.

choose your family.

Name

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Vocation

musician

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Matt Forma