On consuming art with intentio



Musician Annahstasia discusses the undervaluation of music, getting to a flow state, and what she does when she feels doubt.

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As told to Jessica Kasiama, 2251 words.

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

How are you feeling ahead of the release of *Tether*, your debut album?

It's been a long time coming. I oscillate emotionally, but it's been beautiful to see people's responses as we're putting out [the singles]. I'm excited to have everybody sit with the album as a whole because it was crafted to be received that way. The singles [provide] a little bit of context, a taster of what to expect, but I think the real bulk of what I'm trying to give to the world is placed within the context of sitting through the album.

I'm excited to be seen in that way because I think that I have stepped into a place in my artistry where I finally feel like the music that I'm making represents the person that I am fully.

I'm glad you brought up being seen on your own terms, because I wanted to touch on the journey that led you to your sound. You recorded your EP, *Revival*, throughout 2020. I read that you were contemplating pivoting to a different career, or deepening a different facet of your artistry, during that time. What are your reflections on that chapter of your journey?

That was an interesting time because we didn't know what the world was going to be post-COVID, if live music was going to come back. There were a lot of questions. The contemplation of changing career paths, or focusing on different aspects of my artistry, wasn't a new one. But I think that was one of the first times where it was coming from a place of, "What I love to do might not exist as a career anymore," which is very different from, "This is hard and I don't know if I can survive doing this." At that time, it felt like, "I have nothing to lose at this point and everything has stopped. Before I pivot or give up this dream, I want to leave behind something." That's what set me on the path to make *Revival*. It was that type of will that only comes from seeing the precipice and knowing you're going to go over it. I'm not someone to go quietly into any sort of abyss, and that's what it felt like COVID was asking of a lot of artists.

Music is such a specific medium to try and explore, [especially as] an artist who works in other mediums. With other mediums, there exists a physical thing that you can barter with, and that physicality of the material fits nicely into the capitalist system that we're in. Music is something that we all need and something that helps us operate as human beings, but because of its essentiality, it's been devalued.

[Most artists] ask for some level of stability, care, and for there to be reciprocity in the process. But [a song] is not a painting that you can put on a wall and have a curator brag about or show their fancy friends… You can't do that with music because music belongs to the populace. There's no way to release it in a way that does it justice if just one person gets it. That's completely against the ethos of what it is to be a musician and to create music.

As an artist, I'm constantly [dealing with] a dichotomy. Here's this thing that you spend all of your time with—

your money, spirit, and energy goes into it—but because it doesn't have a material form, it's worthless. If I were to spend that time with my ceramics, painting, or photography practice, I would possibly be much better off financially and emotionally. There would be a room somewhere where I could look around and see the product of my time, because there'd be things that I created in that room. With music, its files are on your computer. There's no room for the music that you've made anymore. Everything is digitized.

When I feel doubt about this path, it comes from the fact that my form of art has been devalued, but it requires as much of you as any other art form does. You're living in a world that's gaslighting you about how much you're giving versus how much you should be receiving. And you're expected to keep going on without thanks, praise, or material comfort. People are lauding you for being the underdog or being so strong and carrying on, [but] they don't offer you any sort of hand, system reboot, or operational change to help you keep going on.

You have to find a lot of strength to be able to do that all the time. Doubt is present, but I find hope in other mediums, and in the fact that when I give to other people or perform in front of people, what they receive fills me with such joy and pride that it helps me carry on a little bit more. When I need to stop, I stop. I remember that I am a vessel, and when the vessel doesn't want to give, when it doesn't have anything left to pour out, that's that. And everybody's got to sit with that. And unless they want to help pour things back in, it's up to me. I'm in control.

When you released *Revival*, you were unsigned and didn't have the support of a major record label or publishing company. What do you think is a common misconception people have about being an independent artist?

There are a lot of different things that need to be demystified there. First of all, what is considered an independent artist varies. I remember when I found out that some of my peers who were saying they were independent artists weren't actually independent in the same way that I was. There's *independent* in the sense that you don't have a manager, label, publishing—you're completely self-funding. You are managing, producing, operating, distributing independently. That's an independent artist in the true to form sense. But then there are independent labels and independent distribution, which means they are not part of the big three major conglomerates: Sony, Warner and Interscope. That's like Sub Pop, Ninja Tune, Warp, Kobalt.

There's a long list of names of the independent distributors and labels, and there are independent artists who are under independent labels with full teams, managers, publishing, support and distribution. They just don't have *major* distribution and major support. And those are very, very big differences. Being an independent artist with no support is like treading water in the vast ocean. Being an independent artist on a label is like having a small fishing boat in the vast ocean. Still terrifying, and you still have a long distance to go, but you have some sense of ground.

When I released *Revival,* I was 100% independent and distributed through DistroKid. What people don't know is that if you're not the type of musician who makes everything on the computer, music still has a material cost. I would say it cost me about $60,000 over three years. When people ask, "Why did it take you three years to release *Revival* after recording it? Why didn't it come out until 2024?" It's because I had to fundraise on the back of my labor. If you don't have money, you pay [with your] time. There's not enough visibility around the process for fans. They want to help, but the industry is so skewed. When you buy a concert ticket to see your favorite artist, they're only getting 5 to 10% of the cost of that ticket… The industry has created so many middlemen that getting money to an artist from a fan has become very hard.

There's a lack of transparency, which benefits the industry but de-centers the artist. Can you say more about the importance of fans, or consumers of art, understanding the origins and labor behind the work that they're appreciating?

We're in a culture of such overconsumption, we don't have enough moments in our day-to-day lives to stop and think about the intention behind what we're consuming. We love luxury coffee. But where did the beans come from? Who were the people that worked on that farm to harvest those beans? Was it an ethical process? What is the process of growing coffee beans? What does a coffee bean look like? These are all things that [we] are so removed from, because we're removed from nature and natural processes. Living in America, so many of us have lost

connection to land and to what the process is of reaping and sowing the earth—growing, waiting, harvesting, and the patience that is involved in that. We have analogies for it in our modern world but it's not entirely the same. I think the first step of re-crafting that relationship between artists and consumers is re-crafting that understanding of discipline. If you don't have an appreciation for what it means to work hard and diligently towards a goal, in a deep and embodied sense, when I tell you that I spent three years making this album, that goes over your head.

Exhaustion takes so much of your brain space away that to then conceive of another person's exhaustion is not possible sometimes. People go to music to escape. That's the function of music a lot of the time. The function of music is to feel some sort of catharsis. You, as the artist, are put in the position of healer. We are the means of production, but there's no way to get all musicians everywhere to stop making music and strike because music is life. Maybe there's a future in which we can get all the major artists who have the biggest streaming [presence] to pull their shit off and end streaming that way… We need to figure out a way to remind [people] that have forgotten that music is not free. Music costs money. At the very minimum, music should cost a [livable] wage for me to make it.

And there's definitely the question of, "who heals the healer?" Something I appreciate about your sculptural work is the way that you depict bodies in states of flow. I think because we live in such a results-driven culture, we don't often see or celebrate the beauty of the process. What conditions do you require to find harmony or access a flow state within yourself?

I have a long list of conditions, but first, I would say safety. Safety, stillness, and time are required for me to create flow in my life. There are two different types of flow. There's a flow where you're going along with the barreling chaos, which I can find symbiosis with if I have to, but that's not the flow that I can write in, or the flow that I can be the type of musician that I am within. I can do photography and ceramics in that state. I can paint in that state because it's more of a frenetic grabbing of information and putting it down on a surface. The flow I prefer is the one [looks like being in an] environment where I have time to observe deeply, to understand how the sun moves through the window throughout the day to the point where it's memorized. Some level of routine that is soft but regimented. In that routine, in that memorization of the space, you're then able to hear the way that creativity calls you.

Beautiful. You're leaving for a tour very soon. What tools or practices help ground you while you're traveling?

I find consistent grounding in nature. If I don't have access to nature, I will meditate. I imagine that I'm a tree finding dirt. I'm rooting as deep as I have to go to find some soil, and then I open my eyes and feel more connected to the natural flow of things. That is a very important tether for me to remember: just because we're human and have all of this self-awareness doesn't mean that we are more important or on any sort of holy mission more than a tree is, or a bird, or a piece of fruit. Rooting in humility is important.

Connecting with or remembering that I can call my friends… There doesn't have to be an emergency for you to call a friend up. That was a big thing I had to learn because it wasn't natural to me to want to chat on the phone all the time, but it's become a very important grounding practice for me now.

And then having some sort of self-reflection process that is external to your mind. So either that's writing or a voice note where you talk to yourself for an hour and listen back to it later in the day. Sometimes I'll pick up the guitar and sing a stream of consciousness. I won't record it because it's not there to be recorded or to become a song. It's there to get [things] out of my head. Those are my three main practices.

Musician Annahstasia recommends:

Memorizing where the sun hits in every space you frequent often

Steeping good tea more than once and noticing the palette differences

Taking time to savor all your senses with a variety of pleasures

Learning everything you can about one small thing you discover on an aimless walk

Asking your fear what’s up

Name

Annahstasia

Vocation

musician

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