On creating without structure

Musician Cassie Wieland (Vines) discusses romanticizing making music as a full-time job, deciding when a piece is done, and how she found her way to an ambient sound.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2237 words.

Tags: Music, Day jobs, Process, Beginnings, Money, Success.

Your song "being loved isn't the same as being understood" went viral on TikTok, which, to me, was surprising since I don't usually expect ambient music to go viral there. What happened for you creatively when you realized that your music might have broader appeal?

I got my degree in composition, and I'd been working as a composer before I started Vines, which is my solo project. Getting on TikTok, and also the success from getting on TikTok, was wildly unexpected. I used getting on TikTok as a way to test out ideas for this solo project, but I didn't have any expectation that I would be actually releasing songs. It was during COVID, and I needed an outlet and a way to connect with people. That had been taken away from me since, as a composer, you rely on other people to play your music.

[Using TikTok] initially started as a way for me to figure out my voice… I started only with covers of other people's songs. I don't remember the first time I shared my own original music on TikTok because I assumed that it wouldn't go well. I think the connecting factor between my offerings and the people on social media who picked it up is they found a way to insert the music into their own lives, which was exactly my goal. It became a soundtrack for people to express their own feelings, their own opinions.

That makes me think of the transition from making music just for yourself to more of an audience, and actively trying not to imagine how it will be received because that could interfere with your creativity. How have you found yourself striking that balance?

In my creative process, I don't ever think about how music is going to be perceived by an audience or by somebody else. That definitely would hinder my creative process, and that's not the reason I like to make art. I truly just enjoy the journey of it. If I could find a way to make money by just making music and nobody needed to listen to it, that would be my dream. That said, I think by making this instrumental type of music—this textural, slightly wordless vibe—a lot of people are able to connect to it, and there's definitely a balance between expressing my own self but realizing that I'm not special. A lot of the feelings or thoughts I'm putting into the music are somewhat universal, and leaning into that idea and the feeling that anything I'm feeling or expressing in my music, I'm not alone in that.

What does that journey of loving the process of making music look like for you? What's your day-to-day routine, or are there any common threads that emerge when you sit down and work on your music?

My creative routine has changed over the past couple years. At the birth of Vines, I was still working a full-time job, so I was cramming as [many] creative sessions as I could into my nights and weekends, which I'm sure is the process for a lot of artists. I think a little bit of that pressure of having limited time did help, in some ways, for me to get focused really quick. I would spend nights and weekends being like, "Okay, let's finish a song

this weekend.” I would sometimes get to my goal, sometimes not, but my practice was really just getting into the creative, generative mindset as fast as possible.

For the past few months, making music has been my full-time job. My days are a lot more relaxed now and, in some ways, a lot more stressful. There’s a weird dichotomy of having more free time, but also having a little more pressure to create. I’ve circumnavigated that by making a strict routine for myself. I always wake up at 7:00 a.m. I’ll take the dog for a walk, and I try to make all my downtime as mindful as possible. Even when I’m not thinking about chord structures or lyrics or whatnot, I am being mindful of where I’m at emotionally, where I’m at physically, how I can take care of myself. Because when I’m in the best physical, emotional, mental state that I can be, that’s when I feel safe enough to create.

Given the impact of streaming on musicians’ ability to make an income, I’m always fascinated by the decision to go full-time with music. How did you know it was time to make the leap? How did you know that the financial stability would be there?

Making the decision to go into music full-time was terrifying, to be honest. I didn’t fully know that the financials were going to be there. It actually lined up where I was getting enough income from streaming to make rent, and one of my mentors offered me a part-time label manager gig that made it a little bit safer to make the jump. I am still working in the music industry backend, whatever you’d like to call it, a few hours a week. But there was about a year, maybe longer, where I so desperately wanted to quit my job and make music full-time, and I was fully romanticizing it. I was like, “This is the dream. I’m never going to get there, but I can daydream about it.” The way I made the decision to do it is when I stopped feeling like it was an anxious fever dream that I would someday get to make music full-time.

This might sound silly, but internally, spiritually, it felt like the right move. The financials were almost there, and I could see that the more time I put into this thing, the more I could make of it. I was 30% sure logistically and 70% just took the leap, which I knew I had to do once I realized I was so sure of it internally.

You mentioned being a composer in the past. What have you brought from the experience of other people playing your music to making your own ambient music that you play?

I started out my music career as a classical composer. I got my undergrad and master’s degree in classical composition and music theory. I was a music theory teaching assistant for a while. That gave me the chance to move to New York to work with some classical ensembles. That part of my brain that thinks about texture, and form, and these formal elements of music, is still very much there and active when I’m working on Vines songs.

I feel like I don’t do as much formal planning as I used to when I was making compositions for other people. When you’re writing a score for somebody, you have to put every single detail in there and really lay out what exactly you want everybody to do at what specific time. That’s one part I really like about having a solo project where I’m producing [in] Logic, and I can move things around as much as I want. I don’t have to say, “Okay, at 32 seconds, the violin comes in and that’s that.” I get to move things around. But at the same time, I’m still very much thinking about how sonic textures are interacting with each other, and how there’s this ebb and flow… When one sound introduces itself, how does that affect every sound in the group?

What does the term “ambient” mean to you? When I was listening to *Birthday Party*, I felt like the last song was almost not even an ambient song.

I’ve been thinking about this a lot because ambient was not originally the way I described my music. I tried to avoid describing my music as much as possible when I started Vines because I don’t believe that genre, sound-wise, has as much of a place in music journalism, in the music industry, as it did when people were blind-buying records and didn’t have streaming services.

Ambient was a descriptor I came across because I listened to a lot of music marked as ambient. I think Brian Eno was the first person to describe a record as an ambient record. For him, the birth of ambient was a response to the idea that musicians had to make something really rhythmic and attention-catching because people had short

attention spans. In response, ambient music was like, "This is meant to be in your background. This is meant to fit in with the ambience of regular human life." That is a notion I very much connect with my music. I'm not as focused on telling my own story as I am helping other people tap into their stories. I'm not sure if a lot of people would describe my music as ambient sonically, but purpose-wise, it very much fits into that category.

I noticed that Brian Eno's ambient music manifesto is among your Five Things. I'd be curious to hear more about what that has meant to you, especially in the early days of your transitioning from composition to the music you make now as Vines.

When I was studying classical music, I had a hard time finding music that resonated with me in a way where I wanted to create that type of music. I found that passion, and I found my next calling, when I started listening to minimalist classical music by Steve Reich and Philip Glass. I was drawn to this repetitive structure, and I had a lot of colleagues at the time [who] thought minimalist music was stupid because it wasn't intelligent enough… because there was such simplicity in repetition, and the composer wasn't thinking about how to develop a theme or do something that's never been done before. But I loved it because of that, because you could insert yourself into the music and be fully present. When you have something that's repeating and looping over and over again, you hear the slight changes in texture and process.

What does knowing a song is done look like for you?

My process is definitely different from somebody writing a pop song, because it doesn't have that built-in structure. I can't say, "Okay, we got to the third chorus. We've got verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge." I don't have that built-in structure to guide me, but that's part of the fun of it. I get to sit with my music and feel a beginning, middle, and end, and I get to choose to make any of those moments longer or shorter.

It is very difficult to decide when a piece is done. That's something I struggled with at the beginning of music-making. I decide when a piece is done, not because it feels done, but because it doesn't feel *not* done anymore. I think if I had my way, I could potentially work on a piece forever, but there's just a line that you have to find… The ideas you're having—does that apply to this piece, or is that something new? I think of it the same way I think about mixing. If I listen to a piece all the way through and there's nothing that poked out to me that was like, "I need to change that," then it's done. Print it, ship it, share it, start a new thing.

What you said about how you could work on something forever—that's been a recurring theme with musicians I've talked to recently.

I think it's just because I like making music and I want to do it forever, but as an artist, you have to come to terms with the fact that every project is going to point to a specific point in your life where you are artistically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually. And that point is not always going to resonate with you. That song is not going to feel like you in a year or so because you'll be a different person. After I realized that, it made it a lot easier to finish things, let them go, and let them be for the world instead of for me.

That's everything I wanted to ask you today, but I always like to ask if there's anything more you want to say on creativity in any way, shape, or form.

I usually get a lot of questions on what gear I'm using [in] my music. A lot of social media questions like, "What synth is that? What pedal is that, so I can make the same sound?" I want to encourage anybody who's reading this to work with the sounds that you've got. That's fully how I got started. I had one pedal and one synth, and I just used the full extent of that. It's not what you got, it's what you do with it. I've fallen into this trap. Buying the next, coolest $400 pedal is not going to make you feel more accomplished as an artist, as fun as it is to have a new toy.

Cassie Wieland recommends:

A hobby where you work with your hands (I like making candles)

Italian Penicillin soup

Brian Eno's "Ambient Music Manifesto"

One-line-a-day journals

I Saw the TV Glow (the film and soundtrack to the film)

Name
Cassie Wieland

Vocation
musician

Bao Ngo