On collaboration and community



Musician Christian Lee Hutson discusses finding the ways to make the things you care about.

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As told to Jess Focht, 2306 words.

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I'm not only a fan of your music, but your lyrics specifically. How did you initially get into songwriting?

Embarrassingly, I really loved Weird Al when I was a kid. One of my friends at school had a Weird Al CD and he gave it to me, and I didn't really understand that it was parody music. I thought that he wrote all those songs. And I was like, dude, this guy's incredible. He can do anything. And then years later I realized those are parodies of popular songs.

It took me a while to understand his songwriting and humor, but it's interesting you mentioned him because something I was curious about is your ability to be both funny and sad at the same time. Do you think there's something about your music writing process that helps you heal or work through things by making fun of it or poking fun at it?

Yeah, I think so. My mom has a kind of self-effacing sense of humor and any time things get a little too serious or whatever, she'll just kind of make fun of how heavy and serious they seem. I think that is some kind of coping mechanism that we all need to be able to laugh at it a little bit in order to get through it.

Back to songwriting, can you speak to how that and your creative processes have evolved over the years?

I think that I have gotten a little bit more relaxed about it and have given myself more time. When I was younger, I used to frantically write as much as I possibly could and was rushing to finish things. And one of the things, at least about the process of doing it now, is I'll give things a lot of space to breathe. And if something doesn't need to be done today, I would just take more time to work on things and not try to force something to come out just to do it.

Do you have any other creative outlets?

I write. I'll just write little stories from my life and stuff like that. When I was a kid, I really wanted to be a novelist and I just kind of never pursued that. I journal and write. It's less restricted than writing songs, where I can get more ideas about. And then sometimes I'll even pull from those little pieces and be like, oh, that actually would be a really good lyric.

I also am a big fan of your covers and your play on words with how you write about pain and sadness in a funny way. I love that there's a certain irony to them, especially with songs like "Dancing Queen," but I really like it when artists take songs that are more well-known or more upbeat and make them quieter and more reflective, which I think you did really well there. So I was curious about the process behind that—were you doing it unintentionally, or were you looking to poke at the irony there?

Not totally. I was aware that some of them were kind of funny, but the real intention when I started doing it was

during early COVID when I was just trying to keep my mind active and a way of doing that was by covering songs that I liked or songs that would get stuck in my head all the time, and try to do one a day. I feel like there's probably like 100 of them over those first 100 days of COVID. And then we just chose the ones that came out the best.

I wasn't necessarily trying to be ironic. But I was aware, I guess. I think the first one we did was for a charity compilation and I did a Sum 41 cover. I was like, okay, yeah, this is funny to do an acoustic-sounding Sum 41 cover.

I know you collaborate a lot with your friends who are also musicians like Phoebe Bridgers, Ethan Gruska, and Marshall Vore. What is most helpful or unhelpful about working with others and just collaborating in general?

Being comfortable. I definitely collaborate best with people that I know well on a personal level, because it seems like the most important part of being collaborative is being willing to sound stupid and have bad ideas. That's the only way to get to the good ideas. I've been in plenty of writing sessions with people I don't know very well, where I'm afraid to look stupid, and they generally don't pan out that well because I'm too self-conscious. But with Ethan or Marshall or Phoebe, it's very easy to work with them because I know that they don't think I'm stupid, but we can all have a dumb idea and that's how we get to the good ones.

It seems like there has to be a foundation of trust, for sure.

Yeah, definitely. It's because it's scary to say your big idea. The fear is always you're going to leave the room or whatever and then the person going to be like, "Wow, what a fucking idiot." [*laughs*]

Do you usually prefer collaboration?

It depends on the mood. Sometimes I'll work on something and I'm able to get it all done and to where I want it just by myself. Other times, it's like if there's a person around or it's a block, a place where I get stuck, or a place where someone else gets stuck on a song, then it is nice to have someone else to just support you to think about things in a different way.

So I don't know if I prefer one or the other, but it's definitely really satisfying to come up with something with your friends that feels like it belongs to everyone instead of just this thing banged out by yourself.

And they also have their own solo stuff. Do you think that it's inspiring to be in a group or in a circle that's constantly making music?

Absolutely. I feel like that's one of the main reasons that it's still fun to write songs. The main thing that I'm trying to do is ask myself, "How do I write a song that will impress Phoebe or Conor or Marshall and make them laugh?" It is really useful to write for an audience of one or two people as opposed to just always an audience of yourself. I think it's not helpful at all to write for a large audience or whatever. You kind of step on your own toes in that way.

For young musicians who are trying to share their work or have their work seen in this day and age, what's your advice?

I don't know if I have advice for how to get seen, and maybe this is naive or something, but I believe if you are making work that you like and that your friends like, the best thing you can do is just keep your head down and keep doing it and then it will always find the people that it's supposed to. I believe that good songs and good art always find the right audience. I would say don't tweak anything to try and make it fit what you think is happening right now, if that makes sense.

I think there's so much that's continually evolving right now with streaming and social media and stuff like that. And it seems like young, or up-and-coming artists are trying to balance all of that as well, especially maybe if

they're more introverted and don't want to be as present on those platforms. But I do agree with you, it seems like kind of being true to yourself and your craft will help appeal to the right audience.

I think it's definitely true. I don't think that you necessarily even need to be totally on social media, and in some ways, for the people who aren't, it makes me like them even more because they're sort of mysterious for it. I think that people are attracted to things that are confidently themselves, whatever that version of you is, leaning into that is the best thing that you can do for yourself, because I know at least for me, when I listen to music, it's very easy to tell who is just really, truly doing them. And no matter what it is, that's the kind of music that I like. It's not a specific genre, it's just people that are being their weird selves.

You write a lot about LA, and I love the "this city's full of quitters" line in "Rubberneckers." I know that the city is known for being a place that people go to be in certain scenes, or maybe be famous or "make it" in some way. So I think it's interesting how you paint it in a different way, or a more nuanced way. Can you speak to LA's influence on your creativity and songwriting at all?

Yeah. I mean, I've lived in LA most of my life and I grew up there. And it is a really funny place. When you grow up there you're not very aware of this aspect of it for some reason, but it has this, "We're moving here from Ohio and we're going to fucking start a band. We're going to be actors. We're going to…" Whatever the shit is, there's a lot of that kind of energy around. And then I feel like for the people who grew up in LA, there's a little bit of, "Okay, that's fine."

I think it is an interesting place. It's hard for me to tell how different it is from other places. I think that it gets a bad rap for being a place full of psychic vampires, but I don't think it totally is all that. Whenever I'm thinking of a time or a place or trying to describe, set a song in a memory as they typically tend to be places that I grew up in LA, there are definitely a lot of those on Quitters. There's a high school memory where we all go out to Dockweiler Beach and sit and have a bonfire on the beach and try and see the meteor shower.

I used to think it was kind of lame to be from LA and was really embarrassed, because in my mind I'm like, we want all of our songwriters to be working in a sawmill or something like that in the middle of the country and be these rough blue-collar heroes. And I was like, whoever heard of a songwriter from Santa Monica? I think once I got over that, it's nice and kind of funny to me to embrace that influence. So, yeah, a little bit of that, right? What is around you and what you know, and just be yourself.

Your last album is called Beginners and the new album is Quitters. I think it's very on brand for your humor and what you're going for in your music. I was curious if you could share what inspired that kind of immediate juxtaposition or jump from Beginners to Quitters?

It was mainly kind of a joke. I just thought it would be funny. I'd been joking, like, well, Beginners is technically, my first album. Quitters is my last album. But that's just me messing around.

The first record is definitely about a lot of growing up experiences, trying to figure out what the hell is going on in this world and feeling just stuck in your everything you're just trying to learn. And this record, I feel like, is a lot more about adults, adult experiences and changes and trying to become okay with yourself. And okay with not needing to be defined by the people that are around you or the things that are immediately in your periphery.

How did you figure out how to make a living through your creative work?

I think I kind of just accepted that it's fine if I don't. I would do just whatever to make ends meet as long as I had time to try and do this as well. And I think the people that do this are crazy and you wouldn't do it unless you had to. You'll find a way to do it if it means that much to you, even though it's hard and shitty. I think if it is important to you and you feel like you have to do it, then you're always going to figure out a way to do it even if you're working three different jobs and quitting jobs left and right just so you can go on tour for a week and then scrambling to find work when you get home. I don't know if that's good advice, but that's just what I believe.

And that’s what I see in myself and all of my friends is that there is also a real community of people. Once you have done it for a long time, everyone has the same understanding, We’re all so stupid, but we’re stupid and crazy about music and there’s people who will lift you up in unexpected ways as well when you’re low, and you will lift other people up in the same way when they’re low.

Christian Lee Hutson Recommends:

5 painfully beautiful things that inspired my new record.

The album *Mid Air* by Paul Buchanan

The Sarah Book by Scott McClanahan

The film *Youth* by Paolo Sorrentino

The album *Suicaine Gratifaction* by Paul Westerberg

The film *Somewhere* by Sofia Coppola

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