

On creating when the time is right



Musician Clara La San discusses working from a clean slate, not putting pressure on yourself, and making art simply to understand how you're feeling.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2542 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Collaboration](#), [Focus](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Production](#), [Day jobs](#).

Did you take two weeks off for the holidays like so many people, including myself, did? Or have you just been doing your usual routine for the past two weeks and it's no different today?

I did, but I was with family, so that was really nice. It was definitely good to take a bit of a break, to take some time off work stuff.

When you talk about taking time off work stuff as a musician, what did that entail taking time off from? Was it writing, producing, recording?

It was a mixture of things. A lot happened for me last year, and we had a lot of projects that came out and the tour stuff as well. It was really just not doing anything and disengaging from all things music-related, whether songwriting or producing, and just having a holiday and doing other things instead.

If you're getting back into songwriting and producing at the moment, after this break, are you finding yourself going into it feeling refreshed and like the break was really valuable?

I've started writing again and it feels really refreshing, and I think it's because, when you've put something to bed and when you've finished something, you've wiped the slate clean. You have this time now to fully focus and nothing's lingering, like, "Oh, you need to do this or that." It's just fun. I'm enjoying writing whatever comes to mind.

Let's say it's a typical month of the year and you're in writing, producing, and songwriting mode, but you've also got things to promote, live shows to prepare for, interviews to do. How do you balance all of that and retain your passion for songwriting and production?

For the most part, during the campaign runs, I wasn't really creating that much music, just because I find it so hard to focus my mind on creating new material when I need to do all this other stuff. So I don't put pressure on myself. I'm just like, "I know that I'm going to want to write when the time is right and when I have the mental space to do that," unless I'm in a session or something. If I'm working with somebody else, it can motivate me, and that can really help. But for the most part, I just don't put pressure on myself and just focus on what I need to.

Have you always been somebody who doesn't put pressure on yourself, or has that been something you've learned over time?

I think so, unless it's a deadline. Then, I'll put pressure on myself. But for the most part, the best music I write is just when I'm in a certain mood, or when I'm experiencing a certain emotion and then I have something to say. I don't force myself. I don't say to myself, "I need to write today." If I feel inspired to write, I'll write, and if I have a deadline, I'll put pressure on myself in that respect. But when it comes to creating, I'll just let myself come around when I feel inspired, or I'll find inspiration from somewhere to help.

Another musician I recently interviewed told me something to the effect of, "If I didn't have deadlines, I would just keep editing and the song would never be done." Is that a similar experience to how you work?

Yeah, I think so. I mean, the deadlines always come around so quick, and...I love the idea of just creating something, whether it's visuals or the sound itself, and sitting with it for a long time, because then you'll hear or see things that you maybe wanted to change. But with deadlines, it's really hard saying, "This is finished and this is final," because I don't know if anything is ever final. It's like you have to finish it. Some people might not work to deadlines, but I think it does also help because otherwise, it's like, well, how long is it going to take?

It's interesting to hear you in particular talk about things never being done, because with your Good Mourning reissue, you updated the vocals and changed the mixes. When you listened back to the original version, what exactly compelled you to make these changes or to feel that it wasn't actually done? What are you capable of creatively now that you weren't then?

I can't listen back to the original recordings. I understand it was put out at that time, and it's fine that whatever is on the internet stays on the internet. It has that foreverness to it, where you can't delete things permanently. But it's been a long time since the original *Good Mourning* release, and since then, I feel like my vocal engineering has improved a lot, and just my vocal recordings in general. My vocal takes are a lot stronger, and I felt like I needed to showcase that if I'm going to re-release this project, because I love the songs and I love working with Jam City, and we created some great music together. I wanted to give it justice by having that opportunity to re-record the vocals and bring forward what I've learned since 2017 when it was initially released.

A lot of press about you evokes this image of you as a recluse, but working with other people is so integral to what you do—like you said, you work with Jam City, you work with co-producers. If it's true that you're more drawn to solitude overall, how do you balance that aspect of yourself with your creative need for collaboration?

I love collaborating. I'm just quite particular with it, and I really just want it to be a back-and-forth process where whoever is involved has their say. It's important for me to find a collaborator [with whom there's] mutual respect for each other. And so I'm more particular with who I work with on projects. It's important to find someone who wants to listen to what I have to say and lets me have my moment, whether it's in the production or songwriting and everything.

For some creative people, they'll go through a set of potential collaborators and not feel certain that any of them fit. Can you talk more about how you find great collaborators?

The first thing I like to do when I'm working with somebody is to share. I gauge a lot off the initial reaction and how a potential collaborator has reacted, whether they really like it or they don't, and then you just know you are on the same page.

When I worked with [executive producer] Yves Rothman on Made Mistakes, that was an amazing experience because I had these songs already, but instead of him changing anything, he kind of just elevated it and didn't go off on a different tangent. He got them to a place where I was really struggling to get to myself, but it was exactly where I wanted to take them, and that was an amazing collaborative experience and so enjoyable to work in that setting together.

At what point do you know a song is ready to start bringing it to other people?

When there's a hook, usually, and the basis of the song is there, whether that be the main chord progressions or the main melody, and the vocals as well. It has to have something solid there, the hook or two verses or something, so it doesn't go off-tangent. It's good to have a bit of space and room for collaborators to feel like they can bring something and put their stamp on something too, but I make sure the main song is there.

You recently did your first-ever headline shows. How did you decide it was time to add performing your music to larger rooms full of strangers to your creative experience?

I felt like it was just the right time. [*Made Mistakes*] had been out for a while, and I could see fans were really enjoying that and appreciative of me putting out more music. It was also the case of receiving messages or comments asking when I'm going on tour or when I'm performing, and fans wanted to see me live. It just felt like the right time, and transitioning into live shows at the point when I did, I just felt ready. Just mentally, I felt ready, as much as it was a new thing for me.

I hear you talking about, "Fans were asking for this, I was ready for it," but did it feel like something that you wanted to do or something that was like, "I should do this"?

It was both, but the whole experience of tour was amazing, and performing on stage felt like an out-of-body experience in the best possible way. When I did the show in L.A., everything started to flow more, and it felt right, and I was enjoying the whole thing, working with front-of-house and lighting, and it was such a fun experience going into a live setting.

Before the first show, it was like, "I need to do this, I should do this." But there was also something always there that was like, "I know I'm going to enjoy it, and I know it's going to be good and I'll find it really fun." So, it wasn't just an "I have to do this" kind of thing.

I did do a tour, a North American tour around 2017 or something. I did quite a few shows in North America, but I really enjoyed that. So, I think having that experience helped me be ready for this. When I did that tour, I was supporting Suicideyear, so people didn't necessarily come to see me, and that's different with the headline tour. It's like, all eyes are on you, this is your show, which is an amazing thing because people are coming there specifically just to see you, so it gives you a lot of comfort in knowing that.

What do you think you'll take from these new live shows into your next writing or production sessions? What do you think is the future role of live shows within your creative arc?

I feel like some songs translated really well in the live show, and perhaps there were some that didn't as much. As much as I love all the songs, some translated really well on stage. I'll definitely be thinking about, how will this song sound on stage? But I also love those really downtempo moments in music where I don't want everything to have live show energy. It's just that I will think about it for certain songs.

When you went full-time with your music, what questions or doubts did you have to reckon with? And besides your very good streaming numbers, what, if anything, was the clearest indicator that it was time to make the leap?

I've had a lot of day jobs, and I went full-time in music about three years ago. I was working in a supermarket before then, and I just felt like I was financially ready to support myself. Doing music full-time has been something I've wanted to do since as long I can remember. I've never doubted that will happen. I always knew that was going to happen. I just didn't know when. [I felt that] when I was able to support myself financially, then I [would] take the jump, but it definitely took some time. It wasn't like a quick thought like, "Oh, I'm going to leave tomorrow. I'm going to finish a day job tomorrow." I kind of thought it through, and then it just felt really good.

I'm very organized as a person, and I give myself routines. I go to the gym, and I wake up at a certain time, and so adjusting to being self-employed and full-time in music, I wouldn't say it was particularly difficult for me.

Can you talk more about what your creative routine looks like?

In order for me to write music, especially if I'm just starting something on my own and not collaborating with anybody, I need inspiration to do that. I find that nature inspires me a lot. So I'll go walking, and I'll do a lot of that, and then I'll watch a lot of films. I watch films quite regularly. And then, when something out of the ordinary happens, that inspires me too. Once I've found that inspiration, I'll just start writing.

While I'm writing and producing, I always feel this longing to really immerse myself in what I'm doing. The moment I feel free is when I become transfixed on the music and the process and I can forget about everything else, which is really liberating. But there has to be this pull, this emotion that I'm feeling, or just when I have something to say.

In terms of the routine, it depends. Sometimes I can be a little bit hard on myself, and I'll sit for a while and just try some cool progressions or start writing music and maybe something will come. But then if it doesn't within a couple of hours, I'll just leave it. When I go to the studio, that really helps me to write and create, because I can fully immerse myself in the music and just create.

Is there any particular environment or place that you find is best for your creativity?

Come to think of it, I do get really inspired by places and traveling, whether it be staying in certain... Architecture inspires me a lot, and staying in certain Airbnbs. It's really important for me to have a lot of light in places. The studio is an exception because, while you're actually creating, it's somewhat nice to not see the outside. But definitely places and environments, wherever I'm writing or drafting things is important. That helps me when I do go to the studio and write. I think of those environments while I'm writing.

That was everything I wanted to ask you today, but if there's anything else you want to say about creativity in any way, shape, or form, please go for it.

When it comes to songwriting, it's a journey of self-exploration. The best music I make is when there's a mood that's consuming my thoughts and interrupting my day-to-day, when I feel like, "Okay, I have to actually sit down and figure this out." That's how certain songs have come about that I love the most. Just basically having that inner pressure of, "I have to write in order to understand these emotions or the way that I'm feeling." I can't not, basically. That's probably the time I enjoy writing the most, as much as I don't because it's frustrating having that feeling, but then, you're creating really great art out of it.

Clara La San recommends:

Film: [The Fly](#) (1986) directed by David Cronenberg

Scent: [Roelen](#) by Broken Bouquet

Album: BossMan Dlow's [Mr Beat The Road](#)

Videogame: [Death Stranding](#) by Hideo Kojima

Food: [Carlingford Oysters](#) with Tabasco

Name

Clara La San

Vocation

musician

□

Bernardo Martins