

On capturing the first spark of inspiration



Musician Elliot Moss discusses the significance of staying with the initial idea, nurturing your emotional wellbeing and navigating next steps after unexpected success.

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As told to Sammy Maine, 2352 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Production](#), [Mental health](#), [Time management](#).

You were raised in a recording studio, and you played bass with your dad as a session musician, and your dad was this engineer. Do you think that was imperative to your creative path?

First I was just on the couch watching and then eventually worked my way into doing sessions with people. If they needed a bassist or a drummer or something, I would try to do it. It was great to learn how records were made that way. I loved it so much, but when you're a kid, you have to rebel a little bit and do something else. When it came to making my own record, I wanted nothing to do with it and so the first thing I did was completely change everything and make an electronic record. It wasn't that my Dad and I didn't get along or anything, we absolutely did. I just think it was needing to find my own way into making stuff that wasn't what I grew up learning. Then it all came full circle, and it was really helpful that I'd grown up learning how to engineer and run a room. I think I probably would've found some way of doing it, but it wouldn't have been as natural or obvious. Being exposed to it at a really young age, I was able to find out how much I loved it really early on.

Was your exploration of other genres fuelled by this teenage rebellion? Or were you genuinely curious about electronic music?

It was never a heated rebellion. It was more like I needed to just figure out my own way. The first thing that really made me want to do that was I heard "[Demon Days](#)" by Gorillaz, and it was the first record where there's these noises that are like movie sound effects going on, and I wanted to dissect it and learn about it. It set me off on this path of figuring out such new territory. It was more about that curiosity than it was needing to deliberately get away from my roots. I was just so interested in all these other things I'd never heard of.

You're well versed in guitar and drums, and you said you came full circle and came back to them a little bit after the electronic experimentation. How do you stay curious about instruments or tools that you've worked with for years?

Guitar, I would say I'm not that excited about it. It's like home. It's a comfortable thing I could just go to when I don't feel like worrying about my hands and I just want to make the song happen. There's pedals and crazy effects and things that you can do for sure, but it's technically not something that I practice a lot or think a lot about. Then other things like drums, there's so many different ways to set up mics and record them; there's a million kinds of different drums and heads and sticks. I'm the type of person who has to try every drumstick on every kind of head and keep a spreadsheet and find the way that I like the best. I like to get really technical and microscopic about stuff. Sometimes it makes no difference, but the way you can dive into and learn about these things is really addictive. It's the same with analog gear too; I love building it and changing tubes and

playing with things. It's like a ship in a bottle. Instruments are like that too. It's a similar enthusiasm. I picked up the saxophone over COVID, which was probably the worst possible device to attach myself to during a pandemic. There's just so many different things to learn about it and different pads and reeds and mouthpieces. It appeals to my Pokemon card collector brain. I think that's maybe one of the things that keeps me feeling like it's always new.

How did finding success at 18 influence your next steps?

I was totally surprised by it. The first record for me was something I wanted to just finish; make some songs and put them out. I figured I'd just move on to the next thing and keep trying stuff. I had one night where I was uploading songs to SoundCloud and uploaded "Slip", and I thought something must be wrong. It must've gotten aggregated by all these robots or something and then I went away and came back and it kept growing from there. I had no idea what to do. I worked my way through things until I found some people that could help me with it. It was cool to see something that I made, as opposed to something I played on or engineered, actually resonate with people. I was pretty humbled. There was some pressure to make the second one, but I had already started it and I just was lucky 'cause there was some inertia there already and I didn't have to look at what had happened and pivot and make another thing. It was already underway. It was definitely scary to put something after that 'cause I hadn't really thought that would happen.

How did you pick the people you were going to work with?

Back then, social media was important, but it wasn't the focus of everything. So I was really drawn to people that were excited about the same kind of music and had been around enough that I could ask them questions and they could pull from experience as opposed to just guessing. There was the same thing where I could ask my dad, "Why the hell can't this guitar amp sound right?" And he'd come help. It's looking to these people for guidance that they've got this whole world of experience and I've got none. If I could feel comfortable asking them questions and admitting to them that I know nothing that was the right fit, I didn't have to pretend I knew what I was doing.

In such a cycle-focused industry, how do you stay excited to keep going?

Well, at first, I was just blindly excited. I was never really thinking about what was going on. I was just thinking about what I was excited about. The biggest skill that I learned was to create a wall almost between my little studio vacuum and everything else and really put it out of my mind because I can't work if I'm thinking about what I'm supposed to be making. I just have to explore and mess around and find something that is working in that moment. If you're also trying to inject these five different criteria that other people have, then I think you're so much less likely to get excited about something. The only way that I can stay excited about it is to have my things that are private and that I don't talk about except for with other people making music or friends. That's one of the really nice things about what my relationship with my dad has grown into. He's teaching now and sometimes he'll come and do sound for us on the road and it's my favorite thing to call him and just talk like, "Oh, well they have these sub buffers, so we're going to set up like this." Or, worrying about stage plots and, "What kind of color labels are going to go on XLR wires to plug in the lights?" It's my favorite thing in the world to live in the minutia and then come out and do the thing because you're standing on top of this really meticulously crafted mountain, and I just love to get lost in those parts of it.

I think you can really tell when someone's made something they think people want or they've made something they think they're supposed to make. How do you go about understanding your own emotional truth?

It's hard because sometimes it's like something's just wrapping around your head and taking over everything and it has no shape and it's really hard to pin down anything about it. It's a nasty feeling. I'll try to take pieces of that and turn it into something that does have a structure and now it exists in time as opposed to just wondering what it is. A song is a way of imposing a structure on that. I have a lot of moments where I'll get halfway through doing that and then it becomes a lot clearer like, "What is it I'm feeling?" Or where it's coming from as opposed to just being really anxious and too stressed out and depressed to figure it out. So I just keep feeling the thing. It forces me to look at it through this structured lens, which I really like.

When writing and performing such emotional work, how do you take care of your emotional well being?

Well, it's getting to a point that while I'm in whatever that state is, I feel like I can come back to it and continue as opposed to not quite understanding where I left off. It's bringing it to a safe checkpoint. Even if I'm tired or don't feel like working on it, I know in the back of my mind, if I stop, it's going to go away forever 'cause this is my one chance to get this to where it's going to be usable down the road. Then I won't play it for anybody. I won't talk about it. I won't even say I'm writing a song. If someone asks what I'm doing, it's just in this hidden little realm until it's ready to be talked about and thought about. Then there's nothing expected of what I'm making and then there's no pressure.

I keep things really, really close until they feel mostly there, and then I can let them out a bit. The unfortunate bit in terms of taking care of my emotional wellbeing is I feel like all the best stuff I've ever made is when I've felt the worst. There's this little part of me that hopes that I'm going to wake up feeling terrible so I can make a good song. That's the thing I try to not think about too much or rely on, but I have noticed that it's definitely a lot easier to get from A to B when it's not a good day.

That goes back to that suffering, tortured-artist cliché, which I do think is not a great stereotype because the music industry is really hard enough as it is, and I think people should be encouraged to be healthier emotionally.

I try to flip it, and think, "The reason is because music, and making a song, is more of a necessity in that moment."

I need it to feel better. It's not, "I need to feel worse to write." Just trying to look at it the opposite way helps.

Do you think in order to be a truthful artist or even a good artist, it's necessary to take some aspect of your lived experiences into your work?

If you can be really passionate about what it is you're saying, I think that's the most important. Whether or not it is something that happened to you specifically. It's a lot easier 'cause you've got all of the details with that, but it's only when you start trying to change the story in favor of the structure of the song or 'cause this would sound cooler or this would be something that rhymes better or whatever, that I think you start to sacrifice the thing that made you start in the first place. You do it once, it's okay, but if you do it like five or six times, then you look at the whole thing and it's fallen apart, and you didn't really realize how you got there. So I think just letting the initial push drive you and not letting other seductive things take away from the reason that you started. I made that mistake a lot and still do. I have to push myself to kill my darlings and stay with the initial feeling.

Why is it so important for you to stay with what it was initially going to be?

I think it comes down to my indecisiveness. I look at the initial idea as my compass. I can get to the end if I just do everything to service that initial starting point. The more I deviate, the more options there are and I can go down a wormhole. I'm the type that will sit and try 500 different presets and it'll be three hours later, and I'm not even supposed to be doing this in the first place and then I'm fried. You hit a point where you can't move forward because you're emotionally or physically tired. I try to make sure that everything that should be there is there before I worry about any of that other stuff.

What are your thoughts on the ethics of creative work that includes personal experiences, but also including others from your life in those songs and in those stories?

That's a slippery slope. I wouldn't write a song that tells you any more than I would. As long as it's not so obvious to a stranger, who it's about specifically, and wouldn't draw attention to that specific person. I think it's okay, but I would never want to rope someone into my art if they were unwilling or it wasn't clear to them

So I think as long as it's not putting a spotlight on anybody, it's okay. I have to be careful too because people are smart, and they can put the pieces together.

Elliot Moss recommends:

Blue light blocking glasses for nighttime

Seltzer (always Vintage)

Notion for keeping track of everything

Interviews with Francis Bacon

Shutting off your phone when you can

Name

Elliot Moss

Vocation

musician

□

Jeff Vespa