On how we're always evolving



Musician Haley Blais discusses balancing life online, being the boss, and navigating indecisiveness and the freedom within it.

October 14, 2024 -

As told to Hannah Harlacher, 3359 words.

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

Did you have a clear path towards music, or how did you really get momentum and establish yourself as an artist?

I think there was always a clear path in my mind. I always wanted to do music. I was talking to my partner recently about how I used to say that as a kid you're like, "I want to be whatever," and I would say, "I want to be a singer." That's just the cutest thing you can say. And I was telling him that and he was like, "Well, you are a singer." I think that's just so cute.

Did you always know that you wanted to pursue music?

In some way or another. When I was younger I was doing classical music and it was a much more restrictive technique. I could have gone to school for that. I could have had a very different path of music, but still be involved in it. So there's probably different me's in the universe somewhere doing something else, but I'm sure it's always in music.

Are you still incorporating your classical training and background into your new work in any way?

I would love to do more. I think there's so much untapped history and potential with that in terms of just arrangements, or even implementing some sort of operatic saying or classical singing. I haven't yet. I do try to use the technique that I've learned with breath control and stuff, but [it's different] with the indie singing, singer-songwriter-y vibe.

You'll probably hear in a lot of my old music that I was so strict with that technique. You hear it really high in my voice. You can hear it being very nasal. I can't really listen to a lot of my old songs because of the vocal memory of how I sang them. It was probably a lot healthier, but I don't really sing that way anymore.

It's more of a relaxed style now?

Yeah. And farther back in my throat. Growing up, I thought that singing from your chest voice was illegal. It was very airy, very high voice, and now I'm big and down deep, and it feels really good to sing the way I'm singing now. But I definitely am losing a lot of that classical technique.

Have you always been comfortable on stage, or what did it take to improve your performance skills?

I have typically been comfortable on stage. Even when I was really small, one of my earliest music memories is being at a family dinner and my mom asking me to sing the national anthem to the table of six people. And I was petrified, and I cried and said no, and then a year later I'm on stage at a recital, happily singing to 100

people in the theater or something. I've always been a little bit more comfortable doing that than having such an intimate crowd watching me.

On your own terms.

Yeah, on my own terms, and I do feel I got comfortable from having my YouTube channel in my early twenties, and performing on there, and exercising that side of my brain of talking to viewers.

When you're on stage, you're talking, but no one's really talking back to you. You are just screaming into the void unless people heckle you, which I do love. I love being heckled. But that's the same as making videos and the vlogs that I would do. I would just talk to an audience that couldn't really respond back. So it was great exercise and I treat my stage presence as if I'm talking to [anybody or nobody]. I'm sure on the subconscious level, that's what I'm doing.

Early days you were producing independently. What has the transition been like to now being signed to a major label?

It's been fun. I produced *Wisecrack* outside of Arts and Crafts. so I haven't yet produced an album under the label and their direction. I've been having some really great chats in preparation for the next project. A lot of support. It's cool.

Do you find you're able to really pause and take in these major milestones?

No. I don't know. I have a hard time pausing and reflecting on things like [milestones] because the more these milestones occur, the more pressure I put on myself. So this will be a good reminder to reflect today.

Do you find that as an artist, you sometimes feel pushed to fit within a single genre? Or how have you avoided being pigeonholed into one genre of writing?

I change my mind every second in terms of decision making. I am very bad at making decisions. I think I just let things happen and I don't really like to stay too monotonous.

I am curious about this upcoming project—having a label, and having more of an idea of a well-rounded vision of a musician, and a brand and stuff. They're doing business just like anybody else. [I wonder if] I'll feel the constraints of that genre-wise and vibe-wise. But I just like to be a little bit all over the place. I love all sorts of music, so why not make all sorts of music?

It's refreshing to see you thrive in the freedom of that space. People have so many opinions on what it takes to be a successful artist. You need to be a good performer, you have to be outputting constantly. You have to have this super engaging, consistent online presence. Have you felt those pressures along the way to deliver in all these different areas, or what's your process like for balancing it all?

Definitely, I do feel like in the last three or four years I've been too overwhelmed by that. So I've taken a step back and tried to not think too hard about that. The other day I was like, "Maybe I should try again and just see if it works." So here I am editing a really stupid video, because it's fun to keep trying to see what works. I'm a bit resentful of the fact that artists have to do this, but anyone with any sort of business does, and it's good to sometimes have a reality check that this is a livelihood and a business, even though it's a passion. Especially living in Vancouver and its expensiveness is draining, and when you have to think of your project and your passion as a moneymaker because you need to pay rent, it does get disheartening. I think that's why I've proudly stepped back and been like, "I'm not going to be an influencer, or I'm not going to play the game. I'm not playing their game," Now I need money. And I'm like, "Oh, sure!"

How do you have healthy boundaries with it?

I don’t know if you can when the internet’s involved. I think that on the surface I have a healthy relationship, and then when I get sad about it, that’s when I unveil how insecure and strange it feels to be in this career in this time of 2024 where [there’s pressures of] the internet, and TikTok, and record labels, and whether or not you do need one, and whether or not you need to be this brand machine. It’s all very overwhelming.

How do you find balancing your creative work with your relationships and your life?

I don’t know. It’s again, one of those things that I don’t know if I actively think about, because maybe it would create some more structure and whatever. My boyfriend and I, we’re both creatives. He’s a writer and a filmmaker, and we both have been having this discussion about how when we’re both in the house, we just want to hang out with each other, and go do something, and go get a coffee, and go get lunch, and go to shops. We never are too inspired together to make art when we’re living together. It’s when he leaves the house, I’m like, “I need to write a song.”

I don’t know if I work amazingly unless I’m secluded. I think that’s what I’m used to and that’s how I work best. In terms of it crossing over with my relationships, I guess it doesn’t really. But it would be great for me to figure that out so I could have the freedom.

And going on tour a lot, it’s nice to miss someone but the distance is hard a lot of the time. I might take a little break this next year and just kind of focus on being at home, and exercising that relationship, versus art, versus cohabitation thing.

How would you say you take care of your creative side when you’re not working?

I love being in nature. I had a sort of life-changing flight. I used to be very scared of flying, and I played a festival in Yellowknife a month ago, and when we were flying back on that flight, I actually looked out the window for the first time and I saw these insane clouds, the craziest thing. And I’m like, “God, this world is truly a gorgeous thing.” So I really think that natural elements and the sky really inspire me. You think, what really matters in life?

Do you have any habits or creative tics that you sometimes have to fight against and how do you do it?

I’m a bad procrastinator and putting off things because it doesn’t feel like the right time. In terms of songwriting and stuff, it’s not a forced thing to me. So if the elements aren’t right, I’ll be like, “Well, not today.” And I think that can be a bad habit and a bit inhibiting.

I’ve seen some of your videos where you talk about your love of scents and the connection to memories. Have you always been more sensitive to smell? And when did you discover there was comfort in it for you?

I think always for both of those. I became more aware of it and used it to my advantage in the last few years. Buying perfume is a really expensive habit, but it really brings me so much peace—finding a new smell, breaking it down, and seeing why I like it. And usually the reason that I like smells is because it’s a memory attributed to them.

What’s your earliest memory of a scent that evoked some emotional response?

I really love white floral scents, like lilacs, or honeysuckle, or Jasmine. It really takes me back to being in my uncle’s backyard. I think the last time I was there I would’ve been four, and I can just see the white flowers. That definitely is the first. That’s a scent memory that I come back to a lot.

Is it safe to say that you often write from memories? What do you think draws you back to the past to write from?

I think I do. I tend to really, really be crushed under the weight of my own nostalgia.

It definitely is me working out a lot of things. As I'm writing it, I'm going through something that I hadn't yet processed. I'm sure that has a lot to do with it, and why I've been in a bit of a creative block this last year in terms of songwriting, just because I think that all my songs were about my past, my childhood, and things that have happened to me. I'm like, "Okay, I'm at peace with that. Now what do I write about?" Now I have to live in the present, Oh great!

Would you say your writing is really intentional then, or do you ever just write something because you like it?

I'm trying to do that. I think it's a great songwriting technique and frees up a lot of space in my brain to just write whatever. But in the past and up until now my writing is really intentional. I always want it to be super personal and almost too vague for anybody to understand, but so specific to me.

What is your approach to writing typically like? Is it very collaborative?

No, it should be. Again, there's so many things that it would be great for me to experiment with more, to unlock a new form of songwriting for me. I'd love to do that and I'm open to it, but in the past it's been very independent and kind of no plan, no structure, no schedule. I never was looking at the clock at 2:00 PM, "Okay, now let's write for two hours." It happens in the shower, on a walk, gotta run home something's sparked.

It's kind of unrealistic that way because it takes a long time to get songs out.

I really admire people who can just set aside their whole morning, and they're writing a song A to B, or just trying to figure it out. Got to work on that. I've said this for years too, by the way.

Are you someone that's typically very assertive in the production process, or what have you found works best when you're working with others in the studio?

I'm typically very open. When I was recording my first album *Below the Salt*, I was really not familiar with the studio vibe at all, and I didn't really know what to do. I had the band Tennis come in and do a couple songs for me and Alaina from Tennis said one thing that I always try and bring into every studio session is just "see every idea through, even if you know it's a bad one, see it through, because you might change your perspective by the end."

So I try to do that, and be really open. Typically, up until now, I brought full songs into the studio and we just produced them. We don't write them. So they seem very precious and very, very special to me. So if a producer says, "Well, let's cut this verse." In my mind I'm like [husky screaming] but actually the song flows so much better, and I have to sit with it and be like, "Okay, actually that was a better idea," because you have a completely different view on this song that to me is so special, and to you, it's just a song right now. So you can have fun with it.

So that's what I try to do and just be really open. I could definitely be more assertive. I do think it's hard because if I am out of my comfort zone—I'm not well versed in producing and all the little details that go into it—so I do get a little intimidated, but we're always learning. I feel like this next time I'll go into the studio, I'll be even more confident than I was.

How do you start a project typically?

I typically will look and see if I have enough songs that I've written over a course of however long. For Wisecrack, it was a very conceptual album to me, so I had such a vision and when I met Dave Vertesi who produced it, he just understood it. And so it was really easy. I didn't have to look anywhere else for producers, he was just kind of like, "Okay, this is what we're doing and this is what I want it to be, and you get it." And so it's super easy and really painless.

And with *Below the Salt*, to me that was more of a compilation album. There was really no through line

conceptually. The songs were really different from one another. I worked with a couple of different producers on them. I was very young and I didn't really know what I was doing.

And so for this next one, I don't really know how to approach it because I don't really know what it is yet. I have some ideas, I have some songs. I feel like I want to go in a different direction genre-wise, but I'm not sure what that is. So this one is going to be a mixture of the past two in terms of vision, but I don't really know how to approach this one. I'm kind of stumped.

What's the most surprising thing you've realized along your creative path?

Well, I don't know if this is surprising, but it's something that I've been realizing is that it's really hard for me to be a boss. When you're on tour and you have a big band that you have to take care of, you are technically the boss. And I think it's a weird balance of having the sense of unity as a band, but then these people are just here for your project. And it is a bit of a weird imposter thing in my brain where I'm like, "That's a lot of pressure." And it's hard to be a boss.

What's something you wish someone told you when you began to make music?

There are no rules, none at all. You can really do whatever you want if you're brave enough. There's no limits. I'll listen to a song and I'll still have a moment where I'm like, "You can do that? I didn't know you were allowed to do that."

What do you think writing music and being an artist has taught you about yourself?

I think that I really need it and that I can always be better than I am right now. There's always room to learn more about myself, even if I think I have it figured out. And I think that's always important to reflect on, that no matter what you put out or write, you can always write something completely different and learn from that the next day.

Always evolving.

Yeah, constantly evolving, and like I said, I have a bad time making decisions, and maybe that favors me in some way.

Haley Blais Recommends:

True Lemon: True Lemon is a crystallized lemon powder that you put in your water. I'm absolutely obsessed with it. I was feeling really stressed the other day and I put some ice in a glass and put True Lemon in my water, and I truly think it worked like medicine. So it's my go-to, when I need to calm down.

Kokanee: Went on a trip recently with friends and we were off-roading, which is something I've never done before. We were trying to get to a campsite and we pulled up off the road as the sun was setting and cracked a Kokanee. It was still so cold, and I'm like, "I haven't had a Kokanee since I was like 16. This is a really shit beer." And that first sip as we're on top of this mountain hanging out the back of his truck at sunset. I was like, "This is the best beer that has ever been created, I love it right now."

***Music* by Madonna:** Obsessed with the fact she called an album *Music*. So funny. And it's an album of bangers. [*singing*] "tell me everything is alright…" I heard that song when I was five or six and I was obsessed with it, and I've been searching for it my whole life and I did not know it was by Madonna.

Anything under $5: The world's just too expensive. So if anything's under $5 right now, I'm just obsessed with that idea.

Pulling carrots from the ground when they're ready: Did this recently. You will never have a better moment in your life. So satisfying. I was staying at my friend's dad's house. And in the morning she was like, "Come see my dad's garden," and it's huge. And I'm like, "Oh my god, he's growing so much beautiful stuff." And she's like, "Here, let's pull some carrots." I'm like, "Really? I can harvest? I'm harvesting." It was absolutely stunning.

Name

Haley Blais

Vocation

musician

Megan Magdalena