On noticing what surrounds you



Musician Helado Negro discusses identifying as a worker, rehearsing extra long, and controlling what factors you can.

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As told to Jeffrey Silverstein, 1956 words.

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You're home after a run of shows with Khruangbin. How has your relationship to touring changed over the years?

Touring is hard, not for the faint of heart. People who tour know so many degrees of stress and worry… I started touring in 2003. It kind of snowballed and didn't stop. I'm always on the road. It wasn't until lockdown where there was a whole year without playing shows. That was cool for a lot of different reasons. Not for sustainable reasons, but in terms of mental and physical wellness, biological wellness—as a means to survive, I think it's one of the only ones at this moment.

It feels like you put out a record and you have to tour, continue to make everything float. There's no independent systems. It's not like you can make an album and that makes its own world, then you can tour and *that's* its own world. Everything is so dependent on the other one doing its job. If you don't tour, then people don't know you have a new album out. It really is a cycle. That's the terminology used within labels and media. It's kind of sad because doing something because you have to do it is not enticing to anyone.

I'm not here to reinvent the wheel. I've always viewed it from the standpoint of a worker perspective. It's my background; I grew up in a worker family. I'm not necessarily trying to redefine something. It's always hard for me to know what to do to help mitigate the hardest parts of it, which are burnout or stressing about things that are completely impossible to control, like selling tickets or making something financially feasible.

It seems like touring is becoming untenable for many artists.

My situation is isolated from everybody else's, but there's a misconception about how well an artist is doing depending on who they're releasing records with. I've definitely had a lot of people approach me and be like, "Oh, you released with 4AD, everything must be going super well." There's still this common misconception that leaning on someone who has a lot of legacy and reputation changes the dynamic for your life. Everyone wants one answer, but never the full system answer—which is, "You have to do all these things, but there's a healthy way to do them without it being the end all."

Working with a label is fun and exciting because they bring a creative perspective to how you get your music to more people. They're looking at it from that perspective. In the most sincere perspective, they're looking at it from a place of, "We want to support your art. We want people to support your art. We want people to pay for it so you can finance whatever else you want to do." So that's great, and I think that's important to keep in your mind when you're working with a label.

A lot of people position themselves like, "I don't need a label. I can do this independently." And like, yeah, you can. That's always been the case. People have been doing independent records forever; it's nothing new. Maybe the tools are new, like Spotify, but the same systems are in place. Just because you release it independently, you

still encounter the same obstacles everybody else encounters. There's still the same amount of people releasing music. It's just working with a healthy system, finding the right people, and being really honest about what you want.

Any advice for taking care of yourself on the road?

One easy place to start is food. Something I've learned is to ask for the things that you really want. Like, "Man, I just need these four things." Be very specific with brands and things like that. It's really helpful, as opposed to just being like, "I don't know, just put out some nachos, guacamole, and hummus." Everyone's happy to do the easiest thing, but it's like, whether it's difficult or not, who cares? Try to get it the way you want it. It's so much more helpful to have that peace of mind—to know, "Okay, at least I'm going to have this salad that I can eat backstage." It's maybe the one thing you can possibly control. Everything else is extremely difficult. Even just trying to do an ounce of exercise, you're stealing time from something—from sleeping or taking a shower or eating breakfast or writing an email. Time is nearly impossible to control on tour.

Your sound has changed a lot from album to album. Has this ever presented a challenge for labels or teams you're working with?

I'm lucky. I've worked with a lot of great people and I'm really happy with everyone. I think I've gotten everything that I should get. I don't know what else could be coming or what should have come. It's hard to know these things… Things move in huge swaths and everything changes. In that respect, I've always done what I could do out of necessity. [When] touring, sometimes I can have a band, sometimes I can't. I've heard people say, "Oh, I wish I could always have a band." But I don't. It's cool to have different experiences. I don't think there's an ideal way to do live performance. You're the only one creating these barriers and the perception that your live show should be a certain way. It's important to never say to yourself, "There's a better way to do it," when the moment that you're in now is actually the best way.

Where did your initial spark to create come from?

I started making music through samplers and drum machines. That's how I learned. Listening to records and thinking about the sound that I'm listening to. Looking at the back of the record, seeing who played on it, who did what, and then being like, "Damn, that's an alto saxophone. Okay, that's different than a tenor." That opens up your mind and you follow new music and musicians. You chase all these sounds down.

I was really into the label Thrill Jockey. It was like '98, I got a Tortoise CD, and asked my cousin, "Man, who are all these people? I don't even know what this kind of music is." I started looking them up, finding these different bands, and being excited about seeing folks into a lot of the things that I was into… Then having a guitar and knowing a few chords and just playing it and figuring things out slowly. When I finally went to New York, I started to meet more folks who went to music school and played with them live. I understand more musical language through hearing my band and the different people I play with talk. It's educational in the sense that I'm taking what I need to take, but in a very generous environment. It isn't this academic environment with some kind of structure that's been formed around what you're learning, so you have to stand inside of that. It's just applied to the moment that I'm in.

Music education is important. I've never felt like it's not important. Like anything, it's based on your own creativity. It's a bunch of instructions on how to do something one way, but then I could do it a million different ways. It's cool when I meet people and we're both thinking about music in the same way, they just have a different way they've learned it.

How do you lead a group or communicate your ideas with limited rehearsal time?

Music is best understood when played. I'm less of a theoretical person.

When you're making decisions, you're coming from a place of respect—respecting the people that you're with and letting them know you trust them in the skills that they have, but also coming up with decisions or concise

ideas. Being like, “Cool, I think we should do it like this.” And they’re like, “Okay, great.” It’s such an amazing balance of not just communication but creative thought in the moment—instantaneous process. Whatever band, whatever music you’re making, whatever you’re doing, rehearsal is so much fun. You could ask anybody that’s played with me: they’ve probably rehearsed in my band a million more hours than they’ve ever played in any of their other bands. It’s just listening. I love listening and sitting there and thinking about everything.

You used to work as a Foley artist for film. What did you learn about sound or listening during that time?

The thing you think about when doing Foley is just how much performance is a part of sound creation. Performance is an umbrella term that can cover so many things. Everybody thinks about acting, or poetry, or music, but the performance of creating sound for film is a thing. You have to move around, distribute your weight differently. There’s a lot of specific jargon when doing that stuff. What you also learn is, as humans, we make so much noise. You’re not in a room by yourself; you’re moving around; you have these clothes on you, rubbing against your skin; your feet are touching the floor, making a sound. We’re just these noise-making animals. It’s cool for people to think about all the sounds that are around them. What sounds are taking up your head space or your ear space when you’re making music? That’s what I think about.

It’s cool to hear you reference acting. You’ve also mentioned that certain sounds can become the protagonist of a track or album.

I try to find things I can anchor myself into—some kind of foundation of, “Okay, stop floating, you’re going to be here.” For *PHASOR*, I dug into these specific recordings that I made from this machine called the SalMar. It’s a synthesizer made by Salvatore Martirano. What I love about it is his intention: he wanted a tool that would be constantly composing sound and music. A lot of the sounds are primitive sounding. They’re squelchy and blippy and bloopy and beepy. But it was the intention that he was pushing forward. Some of the sounds are radical and beautiful to me, but not necessarily musical notes or specifically tuned sounds.

I love the idea of getting lost in something. That can create a new place for you to start, or to think about, or to be in… What’s grounding me? What’s telling me something new that I don’t know about myself in this music? That’s what I think about when I’m making work. I want to know who I am at that moment.

Helado Negro recommends five daily motivations for creativity:

Sing with your voice and record as is. Your voice will always be you. My friend Jason Ajemian said to me once, “The only perfection is imperfection.”

Make work you can grow old with. Not for nostalgia’s sake or clinging on to your youth, but rather to appreciate you’ve been somewhere before. It doesn’t mean you need to return to it; all those previous places inform where you are now.

Practice making nothing. There’s value and importance in intention, but the place where inspiration and process come from has no finite boundaries. The brain is a trap and an escape. Keep both doors open. Make nothing while making.

You will always contradict yourself. I do. Making is part of that. Collaborating helps get past the discomfort. Ask for help and share early if it feels right.

Also, don’t listen to me. These are random thoughts today. I’m usually good at not listening to any good advice.

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