On embodying your truth



Musician Indigo De Souza on creating art that rings true to you, embracing relationships and community, and exploring new forms of creativity just for yourself.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2510 words.

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Can you talk about the role of creativity in sharing your life with the world?

I mean, that's kind of my whole career. Ever since I was little, that was the only thing that made sense to me. I was always afraid of the reality of having to do a job that I didn't feel connected to. Every day, I feel incredibly grateful that I get to base all my movements in my life around my next creative vision, how I want to share it with people, and what its meaning is. It's amazing to have the opportunity to create meaning and then invite people to take that meaning and repurpose it for their own life.

Music is a thing—or visuals or whatever you're receiving as a person art-wise—you're taking in, and then it means something to you that it wouldn't mean to anyone else as specifically because your brain is different from everyone else's. As personal as my art is, I recognize that, when someone else is receiving it, it becomes their own, and that's a really special thing. What I adore about the whole process is how it can be shared in that way.

Can you talk more about becoming okay with people having different interpretations of your art than what you may have intended?

It has never really bothered me, because I listen to music and don't know what the writer actually meant when they were writing the music, or what they actually felt, but I have my own projection and my own way of hearing the music, and that ends up being really special for me and my process. It allows me to attach an emotional time mark in my life for different events or different parts of my life. When I hear certain albums, it reminds me of a certain time in my life, and then it allows me to process my growth and what has happened in the span of time that's passed. It feels like music is constantly morphing with the listener and growing with the listener. Because I know what it's like to be a listener, I don't feel precious about what people feel about the art once it's out there.

You've worked with co-producers on at least your two most recent albums, and you have a full band with you in the studio and on tour. Can you talk about the value of collaboration in your creative process?

I'm still learning how to collaborate. It's a hard thing to do, especially for someone who doesn't know any music theory. I don't know what the notes are, what the key is, what's going on technically, and often, I notice that's helpful when you're collaborating with other people.

It's been really important for me to work with my best friend and guitarist, Dexter Webb. He knows what's going on technically, but he also is incredibly in tune with my emotional landscape, how I move through music, and what I want to say with it, because we've known each other for a long time and really care about each other. We're kind of able to speak [a shared] language through music together, even though he's more technically sound than I am.

It’s a really wonderful connection because I’m able to sing things to him or explain things to him, and then he understands and is able to translate to the rest of the band or to the people we’re working with. I feel that same way with Alex [Farrar], who co-produced the album [*All of This Will End*] with me. He’s also very easy to communicate with, and that doesn’t always happen, so it’s a special connection to make.

I’m hearing you speak very positively about collaboration, but I’m also curious, what are some of the challenges that come with collaboration for you?

When collaboration isn’t working, it’s not something you can force. You can’t force collaboration, though there are plenty of people who get hired to write a pop song with a pop singer, and then they have a way of doing it no matter if it feels good or not. But for me, if it doesn’t feel good and it just isn’t aligning, working further within that collaboration is an insult to the truth, and it’s against a spiritual path. It feels wrong. With my music, I’m incredibly protective of what the sound is and what I want it to say.

I feel like I’m good at communicating when something doesn’t feel right. That’s a part of collaboration in the same way that it’s part of having relationships with people. If something isn’t feeling right, you just have to talk about it, have the communication skills to do so, and have the confidence to do so if it’s something you’re really passionate about.

For *All of This Will End*, you were more intentional about not letting others’ ideas shape your music. Can you talk about how you’ve learned to trust yourself? Especially when it comes to your creative process.

Everything I feel within music is always a reflection of my life and what I’ve learned outside of music. When I was recording this album, I had just gone through an intense period of isolation, and then coming out of that period, I met a lot of amazing people and created new friendships, a new life, and community around me. Through that process, I learned to trust myself, love myself, and manifest goodness, actual celebration, and more in-depth, real, truthful communication and relationships. Because of that clarity in my life and the way everything in my day-to-day life felt more clear by the time I was recording the album, I felt that same clarity coming through with the music.

I also based a lot of the songs on this album [on] my original demos, which is something I had been shy about in the past. I had brought songs to the band through demoing, and then we turned it into something different. But this time, I felt very sure that my demos were an actual roadmap to what I wanted the songs to sound like, and so we leaned into that a lot. At times, we even used sounds straight from the recordings that I’d made by myself. [It] all felt more true to me, and the people I made this album with were more supportive of my ideas and were really looking to me for direction because I was [co-]producing it, which I hadn’t really done before. I hadn’t allowed myself to fully understand and embody that role.

What do you need to have on hand to capture your ideas as they come to you? Is there a space you need to be in to do your best creative work?

It’s usually pretty janky. I’ll get my computer and my little interface and a guitar, and I have an OP-1 that I like to play with, and a microphone. I’ll get a very small setup and fumble around in Logic until it sounds like it’s there.

I can play chords, but I don’t shred and don’t know what the notes are, so often, I’ll put a lot of distortion on my voice and hum out guitar parts. I hear it in my head, and then I try to get it down in whatever way I know possible, using whatever sounds I can find, and then it takes some kind of shape that feels right, and then I save it to my demos and reference it later. Sometimes, I’ll end up changing little things here and there while it’s sitting around.

When I interviewed you in 2021, you said that, when you write your songs, you black out and just write in one swift burst of feeling. If that still rings true to you, how do you harness those bursts of creativity? If it doesn’t feel true, what does your songwriting process look like now?

That definitely still feels true. I have lots of voice memos in my phone from when I wrote a song or thought of a fragment of a song. I go back through my voice memos often just to see what's in there, label them, and decide which ones I should use for something or revisit. Oftentimes, I'll be incredibly surprised by what's in there because I don't remember doing it, especially when I'm in a really intense place of emotion like crying.

I'll often play guitar and write something when I'm crying, and, in the moment, it doesn't feel like it's anything. But then later on, when I listen back, I hear a song in it and realize there's actually something there to capture.

It's the most common question, "What is your songwriting process?" But I think it's a hard thing for artists to answer, because not only is it different person-to-person, but it also is different song-to-song and moment-to-moment, and it's always shifting, taking different forms, and growing in ways that you can't predict.

On both *All of This Will End* and your 2021 album *Any Shape You Take*, I perceive the music as mostly guitar-based, but I also hear an upbeat pop or synth-heavier song toward the back of each album, with "Hold U" on *Any Shape You Take* or "Smog" on *All of This Will End*. I'm curious if you can talk about that creative choice and how you approach that different take on production.

It's not intentional. I just write different kinds of songs depending on how I'm feeling. I often pull out a keyboard when I'm writing pop music, because I love the sounds of keyboards, and the guitar doesn't feel like a pop instrument to me as much. That's hard to answer too because…a lot of the things I do, although they maybe seem intentional to the listener because you're looking at a body of work and thinking about what went into making it…it doesn't feel like I really planned for anything to be the way it is. It's just kind of happening and I'm just along for the ride.

A recurring theme of our conversation is what I hear songwriters say decently often: "The music comes through me, I don't really create. It just happens." Is that along the lines of what you're saying?

Yeah, exactly. I think [for] people who write music from a really true space, it's an emotional wave or an emotional muscle that you build over time, and it's a way of processing an inner world. When you write a song, it's a muscle working itself, and you're just there to witness it, and it often just happens naturally, and then you're surprised by the results.

Your mom's visual art is on the cover of each of your albums, and your first album is called *I Love My Mom*. Can you talk about the special role that family, both biological and chosen, play in your creative process?

I'm an incredibly relationship-based person. The relationships in my life are probably my largest focus beyond anything, because I think life is all about having deep connections with people you love and really holding safe and true spaces for [them], diving deeper and deeper, and reflecting off other people, and through other people and with them. I feel the same with family and with friends. I put a lot of effort into my relationships and really care about them, and my friends, in a lot of ways, are my family.

There's biological family, but there's also the family you choose, and oftentimes, the family that you choose ends up being the most important because…you came together by some greater vehicle of fate, and it's strange to be alive at the same time as strangers and then somehow find this beautiful connection between you and end up deciding to spend life together. It's incredibly precious, and I think [relationships have] a huge impact on my music, probably more than anything, because relationships are constantly teaching me so much about myself and about connecting with other people.

I noticed when you sent your five recommendations that you included visual art. I interpreted that as meaning that you yourself do visual art in addition to using your mom's visual art on your album covers. If that's correct, can you talk about how you've branched out from one creative form—music—into another—visual art—especially given that people might perceive music as your main focus?

Music is what ended up being my career, so it’s the only thing that people can perceive as my main focus. But I’m always drawing and working on a painting, and I do printmaking too, and screen printing, collaging, and just doodling, and [visual] art has become a really important part of engaging with my child self and my spirit self, and it has been a more private thing than my music. It feels important to have something that I’m not sharing all the time. That’s just a thing that I have for myself.

But recently, I’ve been putting my drawings on merch along with my life mantras, which feels really good and meaningful and makes me more excited about my merch than when it was just my name and a drawing of something. It feels like the band tee is becoming old to me in general, and I’m excited by clothing that has more meaning.

Also, doing visual art with other people has become really important to me because it’s such a special way to hang out with people and such a childlike, fun way to be with your friends, to have them over and listen to some chill music and make art together. It allows this peaceful state of comfort and community that feels like magic.

Those are all the questions I wanted to ask you today, but if you have anything else that you want to say about creativity in general, or anything else you wanted to add to the questions I’ve asked, go for it.

I’ve self-directed the last few music videos I’ve put out, and that felt important to me, to infuse my video aspects with more of my truthful self instead of letting other people decide what it’s going to look like. With “Younger & Dumber,” my mom and my friends built the set with me, and I collaborated on the costuming with my mom and another friend from Raleigh, and it felt really special to be wearing and embodying things that my community created instead of outsourcing those things. It made me feel a lot more connected to the piece, and that was really important, especially because I took mushrooms to do that music video and I was tripping. If it had been anything more impersonal, it would have felt wrong.

Indigo de Souza Recommends:

Visual art

Dancing

Sitting around fire with friends

Dig deeper into your relationships

The documentary *Fantastic Fungi*

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