

On learning from failure



Electronic producer Jlin talks about being vulnerable and honest in your work, trusting the creative process, and why failure is more important than success.

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"You have to fail. Failure is more important than your success, so like, please fail, please. Fail happily." - Jlin

Jlin, whose real name is Jerrilynn Patton, grew up in Gary, Indiana. She started producing music in 2008. She released her widely praised debut album, *Dark Energy*, in 2015. Her new album, *Black Origami*, is out in 2017. She no longer works in a steel mill.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2628 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Beginnings](#), [Inspiration](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Failure](#).

Did your parents' music collection have a big influence on you as a kid?

There were a lot of records. I knew so many older songs, songs I know to this day: who made it, what year it was made, things like that. Basically, when I came out of the womb this was just the way it was. This is what my parents did before I was born, so I just came into the flow of that.

It started in that world of listening to records. Then, getting older, I discovered you could hear songs on the radio that were cool. But radio has changed dramatically. At this point they play the same five songs, so I haven't listened to the radio in probably about 10 years. I don't know what's new, what's hot, who's the artist—that's not me now. There are stations that still play oldies... if I'm in a car with my mom, I'll put the radio on for her, but usually we're talking anyways so it's just background noise.

But, yeah, that's how it started. I got started from there and then I would watch movies. Soundtracks are a big one. *Enter the Dragon*, that's one. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* that's another one. *Lord of the Rings*. Pretty much all of them. All of Howard Shore is insane; the production is crazy. So, I love different soundtracks. I love sounds in general a lot, too.

You were a good student, but decided to drop out to make music. Were your parents supportive of the decision?

Well, to be honest, it wasn't good the way it happened. I set myself up for failure. My mom found out. I didn't go and tell her. So when that happened, that wasn't good. My mother is very open—she was more disappointed because I didn't feel comfortable telling her that's what I wanted to do. I should've been upfront, and wasn't; that was the bad decision. It wasn't the school thing. But in the midst of that, me making a bad decision as far as not telling her, something really good came out of it.

The good thing was that she saw, during that time, that I would literally go to the library when I was in school—instead of going to class I was in the library making songs. I would be in the library with my headphones on, making tracks, and working on tracks. That's all I did. I had finally found something that I was good at and that

I liked doing. I had never discovered anything like that up to that point. I discovered, "Oh my gosh, I enjoy doing this. It's not just a hobby, but I really do love it. I'm passionate about it."

When I was awake, that's what I was doing, pretty much just like now. In doing that, it escalated. Once that happened, and it was all out in the open, my mom saw how serious I was about it. She had probably never seen me that adamant about doing something in my entire life. I was between 19 and 21.

That's breakdown time; that's crisis age. So yeah, I was in my crisis age. We have so many stages, and I was in that stage. But even in the midst of that, that's what I was doing, I loved doing that. We'd gotten to a point like, this is what I did. Then when I turned 25, I got a job and started working at the steel mill. I wanted to start getting my life in order, and I did. For four years I did that. But in the midst of everything else I was still doing music.

Then while I was working at the steel mill, I had the opportunity to work with Rick Owens, and that's where everything changed. What made me change my mind was I literally went from Paris Fashion Week back to the steel mill on a Monday morning. That's insane. That was like living in two different worlds for me. When that happened, it made me unsteady about my job. I thought, okay you love this, see where that love can take you. So are you complacent in your job now? You also really just got stability in your job, are you going to stay at that job?

It took me two years to answer that question after my album came out. Two years later, last year. When that happened, so many good things happened, especially at the end of the year. All those accolades at the end. Then my mom went to Africa, and I was getting off at midnight one night, and I came home and she had put out all these videos up of her and this safari she had just went on, and I made my decision that day... "I'm quitting my job. That's it. There's too much in the world to be sitting at the steel mill. I can't. My music can take me so far, I'm done." December 31st. I made that decision last year.

It takes a lot of courage. I think every parent wants to be assured that when they leave this earth, their child can take care of themselves. I think that was my mom's greatest concern. Even though I loved what I did, I had to be stable and disciplined enough to handle things as they happened in life, because my whole world cannot be just music, even though it is my whole world. If that makes sense.

It's my means to live, and all of that, and what I love to do; but I had to learn how to incorporate everything, so that it all works full circle. When she saw I was able to do that, of course, it made her feel more comfortable. But you know, when you're acting like an ass at 19...

When you made that decision, did you have a backup plan in case it didn't work? Or did you already see it working?

It was already working. Everybody was asking me why was I still working at the steel mill. After I did *Unsound*, it made me realize, "Oh God, this is really working." Last year was the first time me and Holly Herndon met face to face. It was so funny. She walks right up to me, and I hear this little voice go, "Hey Jlin," and I literally start screaming. I was screaming in excitement. I literally screamed! And I'm telling everybody, "That's Holly Herndon!" Like they didn't know. It was so funny.

So, yeah, I was scared. I think that was my third performance ever, in my entire career. I did that performance, I got off stage, and everybody was just like, "What, are you serious?" I remember Kuedo coming up to me after the show. He grabbed me and hugged me so hard and said, "I am so proud of you." He was so excited. Then Holly was just like, "Wow, why are you still working?" When she asked me that, that's what got me into questioning it myself. That's what sparked it. How people were like, "I don't know why you're still working, you do realize you can do this... forever." That's how it started.

Jlin is influenced by:

My Failures

Talking to my Mum

Water

Aesthetics from martial art Docs and Films

Facing things about myself that are very difficult. In human nature it is very difficult to face yourself when ego and pride are so prevalent. This is the main reason I can create. I have to draw on the the very things that make me most uncomfortable.

Something I've come across, when discussing your live performances with people, is that you're a great live performer, and you're also just a nice person.

I've had people tell me horror stories they've had working with people. And I'm just like, "Jesus Christ." I couldn't even imagine that. In my mind, I think: Why am I going to be an a-hole and make both of our jobs hard? It's really easy. Why am I going to treat you bad? Don't get me wrong, everybody has bad days; but when a person intentionally treats people like they're beneath them because they think they got to a certain status in their career, I don't condone that, nor would I ever do that to somebody. If I'm in a bad mood, I'm probably tired, my body's in another timezone, something like that.

I have seen artists go out of their way to make a person feel belittled. You know, make the audio engineer or the person doing the lights feel belittled. I can't stand it. It drives me nuts. I'm just like, "You weren't always where you are, and not to mention, things can change within a matter of seconds. Don't get comfortable." I live by that. I can't be complacent. There's a rule my mom told me. She said, "You treat the president of the company and the janitor with the exact same respect." And so I live by that.

Your mother suggested you try making music without samples. Is that something you think you would've done on your own? Or was it something that when she told you that it was a revelation?

It was a revelation. I needed to be told that. My mom's one of those people who doesn't waste her words. So if she tells you something, you really listen. Even when she's telling me something I feel is criticism... I may not be receptive to it at first, but that's just human nature, ego, and pride. Or sometimes it's just a miscommunication. So I explain what I meant, then she'll see it from my perspective, and we shape it and put it together. Or she'll say, "Well, maybe you could've done it like this or said it like that." Even in my interviews, same thing. She'll go back and listen to or read something I said, and she's like, "You know, maybe you could say it like this?" She's been alive longer than I have, and she has my best interest at heart, so I'm very receptive when she tells me something.

When you made the last record there weren't many outside expectations. But *Dark Energy* got so much acclaim, that now there's anticipation for *Black Origami*. Has that been stressful?

No. I don't read through reviews. Not to mention, it's not stressful to me because I'm very honest with myself. What I mean by that is as clear as it sounds: I'm honest with myself. Not only am I honest with myself, I can't create out of anything but being true to myself and being vulnerable. I can't create something because something's trendy; I could never do that. That would drive me nuts. If someone said, "Hey, can you make this sound like The Weeknd song?," I can't do that. Because The Weeknd is The Weeknd, and Jlin is Jlin. So I don't feel those kinds of stresses. People liked that I was authentic the first time, and I can't be anything else, even if people didn't like it. Even when I'm performing, I'm not performing to play something that is going to hype everybody up. If it happens to hype people up, that's wonderful. But, you know, you hear somebody do a track, and they put an exciting sound in there in a live situation because they know people are going to go crazy. I'm not that person. I'm just playing, flat out.

People see that you give something your all, and I think they recognize it. I try to exercise everything that I have to the maximum. To me that is what gratitude is. It's not saying, but actually doing. I show it everyday, every time I sit down in this chair, and I work. I try to not only express myself, but literally *do* and not just say. And not just doing because something is trendy, but because I'm actually exposing myself and putting myself out there in some way. It is very rare that I'm like, "Oh, this is very comfortable and I'm having a great time." The creative process is crazy sometimes, a lot of the time actually. But you have to trust yourself.

I had to get over that with the first album. I was in the middle of making *Dark Energy*, and I phased out of the trusting myself phase. Then when I stepped into *Black Origami*, I trusted myself more than I did on that first album. I'm also noticing that there are certain things that I don't like to do, that I did in the first album. So I'm just maturing. Your hearing matures over time, which means sound changes, too.

You said you didn't want to do things to be trendy. Have you ever been approached by someone to do a piece or project that didn't feel right to you?

Nobody has asked me to anything that wasn't me. Usually when people ask me to do something, they already trust my work enough to just say, "Go ahead and do that thing that you do, that only you can do, just do it Jlin way." I hear a lot of that: "Do it Jlin's way." That's why people approach you, they like your sound and they trust you taking their sound and putting your twist on it. I am very appreciative of that, I really am, that people trust me that much to actually do that because my mind does go wild sometimes.

One thing I do want to talk about that a lot of people don't cover is how important it is for you to fail. You have to fail. Failure is more important than your success, so like, please fail, please. Fail happily. Because there's a saying that goes, "Nobody has failed more times than the master." And I think that's very true. I encourage people to fail, please do, it's so important.

Usually most people look at your success and that's all they see. They don't see how many times you have fallen, or that you took a leap and you didn't exactly make the jump. Or that it came up a bit short. It's like playing Mario and Mario dies trying to jump that cliff. I've died quite a few times.

What did you learn from failure?

I learned to trust myself even in that failure. Especially when I'm having a creative block. Me and Holly were just talking about that not too long ago—creative blocks. That's another thing a lot of people don't touch on, because as an artist you put something out and people are excited like, "Yeah! yeah yeah! When's your next project?" And you have to kind of be like, "Unfortunately guys, these don't just fall out my butt." Give me a little bit of time, you know? People are like, "So now what do you think is coming up next?" and sometimes I'm just like, "I'm just as unsure as you... If not more so."

Name

Jlin

Vocation

Electronic Musician, Producer, DJ

Fact

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Photo: Matthew Avignone