

On processing your feelings through creative work



Musician Joy Oladokun discusses journaling, healing, and connecting through vulnerability.

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As told to Lexi Lane, 2417 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Identity](#), [Mental health](#).

Over the past few years, you've released music at a somewhat quicker pace. You've dropped three records in about just under five years. I know some musicians tend to take longer breaks in between albums. I'm wondering, creatively, if you find it easier to keep going like that and keep creating?

I find it easier. It's almost difficult to turn that part of my brain off because, for me, writing music is therapeutic. It's like journaling. It's a part of my day that I enjoy and it helps me process and feel things. So, I think, both that and my love of hip-hop. I feel like a lot of hip-hop artists just release whenever they want to release. That allowed me to go, "Instead of maybe hoarding songs that are about a moment in time for four or five years until it's the right time to release them, what if I started releasing music that sort of, I don't know, related to or spoke to the times that they were about?" That's why I write music so fast, because I want the music to feel like it is reflective of the time that it was written.

Do you find that music you've released a few years ago, you don't really relate to as much anymore? Or does it kind of change in relatability for you?

Honestly, I try to write open-ended or write in such a way that, hopefully, me 10 years from now revisiting a song I wrote today will have something to learn from it. The shows that we're playing right now, we play music from pretty much every one of my albums. It's just sort of a whole... like a retrospective, in a sense. And I just connect to it all. They were all written from real places that I can sort of pinpoint where I was when I had the idea for each one. I have a relationship with my songs in that I write to help myself process and help myself grow, and I want that to continue long after a song is finished. I want to be able to find goodness in it way after it's been out.

What was your earliest musical memory and how did that shape you?

Earliest musical memory was probably listening to Genesis with my dad as a kid, or my dad would put something on the record player. He's a lyrics guy, so he likes to break down lyrics and be like, "I like this song because it says this." And so when I was a kid, I would just basically sit at my dad's feet while he told me about all his favorite songs and bands. I say a lot that I'm a fan of music.

Genuinely, I approach being a musician as a fan would, in a sense, of like, "Sick. I can't wait to listen to songs," and I just happened to be making the songs. I think, because my earliest moments in music were just about listening and processing and enjoying, I still find that's my goal with music, is to just really let it, I don't know, just let it be itself and not overthink it.

You mentioned that your dad was very into lyrics. Did that help shape how you approached music? And was that also

encouraged for you as an art form growing up?

Yeah, definitely. My dad being such an active listener to music, it definitely turned me into the person and fan that I am. To this day, I'll put on a record, and I'll sit on the floor, and I'll cross my legs, and I'll just listen. I can be entertained and encapsulated by music really easily. The influence that my dad's fandom has had on my music-making and the way I love music is just like, it's just down to when you see a show, when you see me side stage at a friend's concert, you're just watching someone who loves... I just love songs, and I just love being able to listen to music and to make it. It all starts with just being a listener.

When did you first start writing songs or knowing you wanted to be a musician?

I started writing songs when I was a kid, probably 10 or 11. That's when I got my first guitar. My parents were very supportive of it as an outlet, but they're like, "Obviously, this is not a job. This is something you do when you get home from being a doctor."

I spent a lot of time as a kid... We weren't allowed to watch TV Monday through Friday, so I would do my homework, and then I would play music. I would just play guitar. I would write. My parents were really encouraging of that just in the sense of like, I played sports and I did other stuff, but in terms of focus, like a hobby that I focused on and really sunk my teeth into, making music and writing music was the first thing that they saw me stick with. Growing up, my parents were like, "Yeah, if you want to play, we'll help you buy your first guitar. We'll help you do whatever you need because we can tell that you love it."

Was there a specific moment for you where it kind of clicked that, "This isn't just a hobby," or that you convinced them, "This is more than just that?"

They have to have that wake up call every few years. One of the first times I got invited to play a festival in Liverpool, and I brought my parents with me, them seeing me perform live to a room full of people made them go, "Oh."

Especially with the internet, most of what my parents knew about my career was like, "Oh, look at our child playing guitar in front of their phone for work." I think for them to be at a show and to see people interact with the music and to see me play music was really, really eye-opening for them. And then random things, like they heard me on NPR. One of my songs was on, *This Is Us*. They have little touchdown moments where they go, "Oh, this is work. She's working."

You mentioned a little bit about the internet, and I am pretty sure you grew up maybe in the late '90s, early 2000s. I'm wondering if there were any artists specifically you stumbled upon yourself and that helped you realize you wanted to be a musician?

I've always had relatively older taste. I was a big Bob Marley fan growing up. My dad was a Bob Marley fan, but I gravitated to Bob Marley's music in a way that I didn't gravitate to a lot of other stuff that my dad, that anybody showed me. I honestly think it was because it was like this guy with locs and smoking a bunch of weed, singing about sitting outside with his friends in a better world. For me, I just feel like Bob Marley is one of those people. Bob Marley, Nina Simone... I'm trying to think of contemporaries. Janelle Monáe is a person I find myself inspired by. The people who just seem to be like, "I'm going to be myself and also make music."

The cool thing about growing up with the internet is if I heard, I don't know, like [an] Uncle Kracker song on the radio, or if I heard "Little Wing" by Jimi Hendrix, I could go to Google and be like, "I heard this song with these words." I could find it and sort of immerse myself in that person's story. That's something I still do today. I heard a cover of "Blues Run the Game" yesterday, and I spent the rest of the day researching the guy who covered it just because.

How do you typically start the process of creating a song?

It just depends on the situation. Sometimes, I do the co-writing thing where you sort of have a writing appointment with someone else. I go at like 11:00 AM and we write until we have something. Because it becomes such a part of my processing in my day-to-day, if I feel inspired by something, I'll just grab my notebook and just write it down, or grab my phone. I tend to do music and lyrics at the same time, so I'll literally just hash it out.

For me, it's almost like music is a language in which my brain sort of speaks and thinks. Yesterday, I got off stage and immediately went to write something really quick because I couldn't stop thinking about it. I just try to keep an openness to whenever I feel that sense of inspiration, whether that's setting a time and being like, "I'm going to write," or making space in a busy moment to just let my brain express itself.

It can definitely take a little bit. I finished a new record a couple weeks ago, and I produced it all myself. A lot of times, when I'm writing something, I sort of hear everything all at once. I hear drums, guitar, all that different stuff like that. The challenge that I went through making something myself from scratch was sort of knowing, one, when to stop, and two, knowing what type of clothes that the song actually wants to wear versus my brain just being its crazy creative self. I sort of have been trying to find this balance of letting the mind go wild, but also finding ways to harness that in a way that feels usable.

You've spoken about your relationship with religion changing from growing up to now, both in interviews and through songs, including your one, "Questions, Chaos, and Faith," from earlier this year. Has that impacted the way you approach music, if at all?

I'm always going to have a spiritual view of music. To me, I feel like what you put on, the type of music you can put on can set your mood. I make music for people who, if, at some point, they want something slightly encouraging to listen to on their way to work or if they want to hear a friend say, "Hey, I get that life is shitty, too." That's sort of what my music provides for people.

Other people would give us like dancing and goofing off. The hope that I have as an artist and as a person is that my music shapes other people's lives in the same way that music shapes mine. In the same way that maybe religion can provide comfort or guidance, and again, I'm not like a cult leader or a weirdo, but I want people to be able to go, "I don't have to go to church, but I can feel something inspiring," or "I can think about god," or "I can think about doubt."

There are people who make music for shaking ass, and I make music for stoners at 3:00 AM who are talking about whether they believe in god or not. What I like about my music is that I've been able to hold on to the spirituality of it and sort of harness it into something that feels more honest. It's something that feels real, that doesn't feel like it's maybe prescribed by a religion or something.

One of your other songs that I was personally very struck by was "Trying." I'm wondering, as a musician, is there ever sort of a fear of being too vulnerable or too open? Or do you think it helps build a community of those who relate to what you're singing about?

It helps build a community. I think that, if anything, it may hinder the heights to which I may scale, because I don't think people want to think about their problems that bad. But there's a value. When someone's vulnerable in front of me, I feel like it opens me up to be like, "Oh, I can be vulnerable, too." That is sort of the service I offer as a rock star. You're going to come to a show and you're going to see someone be human in front of you for 90 minutes. Truly, that's literally, I think, all that I offer as a musician.

It can be scary to be vulnerable, but I've seen such great value come from me being vulnerable in all these different types of rooms with different types of people and having people sort of process their own vulnerability and their own openness, and also how they relate to people different than them in the world.

What is one piece of advice that has stuck with you, and what's something you also wish you had been told about making music?

Jason Isbell told me once that it's my name on the sign. Essentially what he's saying is like, you have a band and you have a team, but at the end of the day, they represent you. I think it's different than maybe The Doors or The Beatles where it was all of them together. They were all in it together. For me, it's like I have a band, but the shows are my shows. And finding a balance. If I could go back and be in a band at the time of like the Grateful Dead, I think that would be my peak. That's probably when I would thrive the most.

What do you hope listeners will take away from your new music?

That they are not alone in feeling like the world has become a little bit more confusing to navigate, or just, period, that they're not alone. I think I bring a sort of simple everyman thing to the table with my songs. This next collection of songs, honestly, is written from the perspective of someone who hates their job a lot. And I think everybody can relate to that. Life is hard and I make music for people who feel the difficulty of that.

Joy Oladokun recommends:

Handstands.

They Can't Kill Us Until They Kill Us by Hanif Abdurraqib: I feel like sometimes pop music can be dismissed as fluff, and I think that Hanif writes about the substance.

Making playlists.

Watching tattoo videos on YouTube.

Teaching myself how to DJ.

Name

Joy Oladokun

Vocation

musician

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