On being a professional songwriter

Musician Justin Tranter discusses what it was like to move from being on stage to working creatively behind the scenes, the best ways to approach a fruitful collaboration, and why pop music remains a powerful, universal language.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3040 words.

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Did you always know that music was your path?

I went to an arts high school and I started out in musical theater. About halfway through, I transferred to the music department and stopped taking acting classes. That always just felt weird to me. I think as someone who has been so proudly feminine my whole life, and fought to be as feminine as I wanted to be, taking a class and pretending to be somebody else always felt odd to me.

Later I went to Berklee College of Music for songwriting. I actually have a degree in the career I pursued, which is crazy, but I definitely always thought I would be writing songs for myself, not for other people. When I was at Berklee, I was obsessed with Ani Difranco, Tori Amos, Paula Cole, Patty Griffin, Patty Larkin, Courtney Love, Gwen Stefani, and Stevie Nicks. Basically, any amazing woman who wrote a song, I have her whole catalog memorized. I'm still obsessed with all of them.

I thought I would definitely be one of *those.* Becoming a full-time behind-the-scenes songwriter was an accident. It was an accident that I ended up having to work super hard for. It wasn't like, "Okay, I'm gonna go be a songwriter now." The opportunity was presented to me and I just ran towards it with full force. I did as much as I could to try to win at it.

When exactly did that happen? I remember seeing your band, Semi Precious Weapons, opening for Lady Gaga, then the next thing you know you've become this songwriter for other people. Was there a particular moment when you knew that you were on this other creative path?

The band had moved to L.A. in 2012 to make an album. We were working with an amazing producer and moving things in a much more pop direction, but we were signed to Epic and it felt like everyone at the label just kind of flat-out hated our band… which isn't what you want, obviously. The guy who signed us to our deal had left the company and it seemed like we were gonna be dropped. I was lucky enough to cross paths with this brilliant woman named Katie Vinten at Warner/Chappell, who started sending me out to songwriting sessions with people, mostly just to see what might happen, since things with the band were going so badly.

The band was still happening, and we were still doing a tour here and there, but I was trying to get into as many pop songwriting sessions as I could. The band got along fine, but our business situation and the people involved on that side of things just got weirder and more fucked up. I hadn't written any hit songs yet, but lots of

awesome people had recorded some of my songs by that point. I was just like, “I don’t know if I can handle the drama and the stress of trying to make this band work anymore.”

So I told everyone, “Sorry, but I’m focused on songwriting now,” which was really hard because we had been a band for almost 10 years at that point. And we lived together. We continued to live together for another year or so after we stopped being a band. But for me, when the songwriting stuff started to take off, I went full-force into it. It was like, “All right. This is working. I need to just really go for it.”

Did you feel some kind of loss? Going from fronting a glam-pop band to working behind the scenes must have felt like a radical shift.

Our band wasn’t really known for our albums, or our songs. We were known for our live shows. I do think for people who are aware of our live shows, and of my past, it is a little… well, shocking is not the right word, but it’s surprising.

To be honest, I don’t necessarily miss performing. Life is a performance, right? I get to perform in the studio every day. And I create a performance that is much more subtle. My performance is about doing everything I can to create confidence in the room, and create safety in the room. I’m working to create a space where everyone I’m collaborating with feels free enough to make bold choices, and stupid choices that maybe turn into brilliant choices. My performance comes in through that.

The only time I perform publicly anymore is for charity. The first thing that crosses my mind is that I really enjoy the talking between the songs. And I’m like, “I should just do a talk show.” I’m probably never gonna do that, but I guess my point is that I did the band thing for so long, I don’t really miss it. Also getting on the road, and doing promo, all that shit is a young person’s game. And I am very proudly not that young anymore.

You can’t be that old.

I am 38, which in the entertainment business is, well… like, for me to launch a solo pop career, I don’t have the energy for that.

So what is the breakdown of your creative life at the moment? I assume you must have a studio in your home?

I have a baby grand piano in my house and I have a little writing room with a couple mics set up if we need them, and some decent speakers. I probably write on average about 10 songs a week. I’m lucky if the world gets to hear just one of those songs. And then I’m *really* lucky if four songs a year make it to the radio. It’s a lot of repetition and a lot of putting the hours in. It’s all about finding the people that you really like working with and who you really connect with. I need to have a couple of those groups if I want to keep up the level of output I have now.

I work on the songs up to a certain point and then usually a producer takes over to finish things. I often really click with certain artists when it comes to writing, but then they go off on tour and you move on to work with someone else. I have my steady collaborators, but then a few times a month I’m writing with people that I’ve never met before.

I’m in this amazing, amazing place now where it’s not about me. Very rarely am I coming into a session saying, “I really want to talk about *this*.” For the most part I’m collaborating with songwriters who are much younger than I am. They still have that raw passion and there is usually this topic they *need* to talk about or else they’re gonna explode, which is how I myself would write songs from the ages of 14 to 30. My job is to kind of get in there and find the clearest, most truthful, and most powerful story that my collaborator is confident enough to share with me.

When you walk into a room to work with someone who you haven’t met before, how does that usually work? What does the process usually look like?

Normally you start off just by talking for at least an hour or so, especially if it's someone I've never met. Even if it is someone that I'm really close with, we still normally talk for at least an hour. You spend some time just to get to know each other, get the vibe. Sometimes I'll be making mental notes of things they're talking about, things that I think would maybe be a great song title, or at least a great song topic. And sometimes I'm just blurting that out, like, "Oh, I love that. We should talk about that."

It all kind of comes from them. We listen to music they've already made for the project so far, if there is any. I'm lucky enough at this point where I would say 75% of my time is with the artists directly, which is good. When you have artists like Dan from Imagine Dragons, or Bebe Rexha, or Julia Michaels—artists who are unbelievable songwriters as well—my job is just to be there to focus, elevate, and create confidence. When I was younger, that probably would have driven me crazy. I would have been like, "No, I need to talk about *me*." Now I just think it's such a fucking cool way to create, to have it *not* be about you. But it *is* about you because without you there, it might not be the song that it is.

It can be a weirdly amorphous role that you're playing with somebody, depending on what they need from you, or what the material needs. You really have to be adaptable in a true sense to whatever the situation demands.

A hundred percent. That's what makes it fun and keeps it exciting. And that's what makes it not ever feel like a job. As with anything, of course, there are stresses, and there are pressures and drama. But it still is the best job in the world. And then when every couple days, or every day, or every other week your creative environment completely changes, and your collaborators completely change—*that* is what makes it the best job.

So, say you're going to go work on a song—you're going to start from zero and make something totally new. Has your songwriting process for how you do that changed much over the years?

Oh, I can't do it. I can't do it anymore. It's such a weird thing. I can start an idea on my own, but I need to collaborate. From the age of 14 until I was 30-ish, for the most part, I always wrote alone. And now here I am eight years later, and the idea of writing a song alone seems insane. Sometimes I like figure out new cool chord changes alone. Or if I do have an idea I love, I will try to sit down and kind of just put that main idea to music. But I can't even imagine finishing a whole song alone anymore.

If you listen to lots of pop music, maybe it helps you have an inherent understanding of the mechanics of pop music and how it works. If you're a lifelong lover of songs, do these forms just sort of become imprinted on you?

I think so, for sure. Luckily the whole world listens to music, which gives musicians a head start on a lot of creative fields because it's such a part of everyday culture. Everywhere you go there is music.

If you really become a conscious listener, there is so much to learn. And then if you do even the tiniest bit of research to understand what these structures are, and why these structures exist, and *then* you go back and become a little bit more of an educated listener, certain things will just start popping up in your work. You can start to hear why something feels good. It's like, "Oh, because the verse starts after the one. The pre-chorus starts before the one. And the chorus starts right on the one. It's like we've kind of landed at home." You start to understand the psychology and mechanics of it. With a little teeny, teeny bit of education you can start to hear all those things as you just listen to your favorite songs, and you can kind of crack the code on why they feel so good.

Apart from that there is just the endless, endless mystery factor of the raw talent, which you kind of just have to pray that you have. However, I'm a firm believer that, while I've always had a witty way of speaking, for the most part I willed my talent into being. I was not very naturally gifted. And I have teachers in high school who will confirm that. I was just fucking determined.

But I think you're right about listening. Listening, but being slightly aware of what you're listening to, can definitely change the way you write, and inform the way you write for the better.

I think there is a myth around creativity suggesting that people who are really good at things were always just naturally good at it. Maybe this is true sometimes, but usually it involves a tremendous amount of work, of "willing" something into being. Talent is something you develop.

A hundred percent. There are obviously different levels to having it or not having it, or working your ass off and not working your ass off. But I work with 20 year-olds, 19 year-olds, and 18 year-olds all the time who are some of the best writers I've ever met. And I'm like, "Fuck you."

They're still working their asses off. And, yes, they've been working for a much shorter time, but they're still working their assess off. And they're still cultivating, and they're still very open to being collaborators. There is a reason they're that good that young, and a lot of it involves having a much more natural gift than I ever had. Still, there are two sides to that conversation. It's easier for some people than others, but it doesn't matter unless you are really willing to put in the work.

What advice do you have for young songwriters?

People say to me, "My nephew wants to be a songwriter. How do you do that?" And I'm like, "Well, I started a glam punk band and wore high heels and pantyhose, and spit champagne on the audience. That's how I got into the music business. But I don't really know what to tell your nephew." I personally was always interested in the business side of things, plus I always paid attention to who was writing the songs I loved, and who was producing them. Otherwise, it's still a fucking mystery.

I always tell young musicians and songwriters, "Just create as much as you possibly can. And make as much noise as you possibly can." That's kind of the only way to do this. It's such a mystery. You have to study your craft, and you have to work at your craft as much as you possibly can, but then you also have to find creative, insane ways to make as much noise as possible to get people to fucking pay attention. Especially if your dad doesn't work in the music business. [*laughs*]

What do you do when a song just isn't working?

For the most part I always try to find interesting and different ways to power through, to make sure that we at least get the song done. Even if that song isn't a home run, if we like working together and if we feel that sense of accomplishment, then we can hopefully come back together in a week or so and feel good about what we did because we at least finished it. And then maybe we'll make something else, something better.

If we're stuck melodically, I will go and look at the sections we already have and do the melodic math to see what would work. Obviously there are these basic rules that are meant to be broken. But pausing to ask yourself, "What kind of melody? What shape of melody? What sort of rhythmic division? Where in the phrase should the melody go in contrast to the other sections we already have?" I'll do that to keep the melody moving forward.

And then if we're stuck lyrically, I always just go, "Okay, let's just stop thinking about the rhyme. Let's just talk about this as human beings and think about what we're actually trying to say. Let's just have the conversation, and I'm sure the lyric will present itself." And for the most part that always works.

Why is pop music such a powerful means of communication?"

Pop as a genre doesn't really have a sound. When you say "pop" people just immediately imagine super down-the-middle, bubble-gum pop stuff. All that stuff, whether you realize it or not, takes an insane amount of intelligence and awareness. They know what they're doing, and why they're doing it. But "pop" as a whole literally just means popular.

And so for me, anything can be pop, as long as it's clear. The definition of pop just means that it's the clearest version of that song. The clearest version of that idea, and that moment. The vibe of the track really relates to the vibe of the lyric, and the lyric is as clear as it possibly can be. There are usually—hopefully—

those couple of lines, which normally but not always involve the title of the song, that really just sums that motherfucker up.

So you can hear that chorus and go, “Oh, okay, this song is about apologizing. Okay, this song is about being strong and confident, but still okay with your feminine sexuality. This song is about falling in love.” When it works, you can hear it in one listen, and you know what it is, and why it is, and what purpose it’s serving. You connect to it because it is absolutely clear. That’s why the art form is so powerful, and why it’s so important. Trends in pop will always change, but popular music is popular for a reason. It’s popular because it’s clear enough to understand. It’s popular because of the way it makes you feel.

The main songwriters that I always, always go back to because their music moves me, inspires me, and reminds me why I started making music in the first place: Ani Difranco, Tori Amos, Patty Larkin, and Patty Griffin. Those four I always come back to at least three days a week. In terms of vibe, I think Tori’s the queen. In terms of lyrics, Ani. Ani rules all. And then in terms of the subtle emotional mathematics of music, Patty Larkin is my favorite.

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