

On finding inspiration in your every day



Musician Katie Tupper discusses being a business, uncovering ideas in alternative disciplines, the importance of an outside perspective, and being proud of your roots.

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As told to Hannah Harlacher, 3669 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Collaboration](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#), [Business](#).

Do you remember, was there a moment where you started telling people that you were an artist and it felt true?

Honestly, probably this past year. The more hows that I play and the more that I'm touring confirms it. Performing is something that I've realized I like the most. It's my favorite part of it. I think being able to do that more and feel like I'm okay at has helped me.

This past year I started saying that I'm a musician, and now I actually feel like that. It actually feels like my main job. This is my main thing and it consumes 90% of my day, and everything else is to support it, versus it being a hobby, which it kind of felt like for a while.

Are you at the point where it's starting to feel like a business?

You can only accept and pay so many invoices and not be like, I am a small business. So I feel like it's definitely a business now. And right now I'm making an album and touring and everything. It's just seeing the amount of money that comes in, but also comes out. It's running through me, so it feels like it's my money, but this year I've detached myself and I'm like, none of this is mine.

I pay myself out what I can, but it just moves through me as a business. It's still peanuts compared to what some people are making, but it still feels like, "Okay, this is a business amount of money that I have to be responsible with. And I need to put it towards the correct things and not go crazy when I get money sent to me."

Do you have a good team that's helping manage things?

Yeah, I have an amazing manager. When I was signed to my label, they offered management options, and everyone said, "Don't take a manager from your label, they are only going to work for the label's interest. Do not do that." And I was like, I don't know, this guy seems pretty chill. I think I'll try it out. He was like, "We'll just do a six-month trial period. If you don't like me, there's no contracts, anything." And then we just never talked about it again. And he's been my manager since and he's the best. He's so smart. And honestly, everyone...I feel like I've really been able to find my people. I just got lucky with mine being normal and competent and awesome.

That's so important to have a team that's competent and supportive, and really believes in what you're doing, right?

Yes, and I think it's really nice that they include me in it and give me so much responsibility. My label encourages me to make an album and I can go off and present them with whatever, and they're like, "awesome." I just feel like I'm able to do whatever I want, what I actually genuinely want, which is really nice and something that I take for granted a little bit. I'm so so happy with them.

Are you getting pretty familiar with the business side of things?

I think I am definitely... I'm just really nosy. I want to know everything. It's my money, what they spend on marketing, whatever, it's all recoupable. So if I'm going to have to be paying this back, I want to know that it works and it's good. I'm the laziest, busy person. I don't like doing work, but I need there to be work going on at all times. I'm like, "What is going on? Who is working on what? What is being submitted?" But then also I'm lazy and miss meetings.

I think it's really good that there's an interest. A lot of the time it's probably pretty overwhelming.

I just think it's fun, too. When there's things going on, it means that something matters about my music. That's how it feels, which isn't true. Art does not care about productivity, but it's so fun to be involved in all of it. I love it.

How do you define your sound, and how do you continue to develop it?

I often wonder if I had a different voice, if my music taste would be the same. Growing up and having a lower voice as a woman, led me to be obsessed with other female artists where either they sang high enough that I could sing in an octave below, or they sang in my range.

I was listening to a ton of Norah Jones, Erykah Badu, and Sade—stuff that my parents put me onto. And then when I was in high school, this guy that I was making music with was obsessed with neo-soul music, and so I started making neo-soul stuff. I was born sounding the way I did, and I wonder if that dictated things, but also I love R&B and neo-soul music. The more that I'm making my own music, I'm getting really inspired and excited about more alternative and indie takes on R&B.

I think that's where my true love lies and where I want my music to be. I want to be able to have some banjo and it to still be R&B poppy vibes.

It's cool that you're not limiting yourself to one genre. In that indie space, there's a lot of room to do whatever you want because it's so broad.

Well, that's the thing. All of the people that are tastemakers, and all the music that I want to listen to doesn't really have a genre. It's a very distinct sound in and of itself.

What have you been listening to as of late that's been inspirational?

Well, I really like the new The Marías record *Submarine* and I've been listening to a lot of Sigur Rós. I think they're Icelandic and they were really popular in the nineties. They have really beautiful soundscape music. And I listen to a lot of Nick Hakim.

Are you someone that's really consistently looking for new music for inspiration?

Yeah, right now I am especially. I'm working with two of my friends to make this album and we've been sharing a lot of music to get on the same page so that we're thinking the same way, and having inspiration hit in the same palette.

I also think that the type of music I've listened to has been really sheltered. Even growing up, my parents would put me onto new stuff, but I was more into sports and hanging out with my friends. I didn't have this obsession

over new music. So I feel like I've missed out on a ton of classic music that all my friends know. I didn't go to school for music either, so I don't know all of the jazz standards, and how they're being sampled in rap music, and all the ways that they intersect. I feel like I just don't know that. Being inspired by it is such a small portion. So I force all my jazz nerd friends to send me music so that I can stay on top of it.

Do you have some theory background? How do you typically approach writing music?

I grew up playing piano. I probably played it for 10 years. Now I sit down at a piano and I feel like I'm a toddler. I've lost all ability to play, but I learned how to read music. I was ear-trained for a couple of years. Now I'm writing music very simply on piano or guitar, or more often I'm getting into a room with friends and they just build. I give them an idea or they come up with an idea, and they build something out. Then I'll try to write the top line and melodies over it, and then give more opinions - add this, take this out, that sort of thing.

So it's a mix, which is really fun because I know that there's people that have a wider bandwidth when it comes to writing instrumental pieces of music, and it's much more inspiring for me to be around those people than to be like, okay, I know four chords. I used to be so embarrassed by that, and letting yourself get over the shame of the fact that you're not the one that picked those chords, it's like my world has opened up in technicolor since I've just let other people do what they're really good at, and appreciate that, get inspired by that, and then write new songs that I would never have written before, if I wasn't writing with these people.

And it gives you more space to really shine at what you're best at too.

Totally, yeah. So now that my job for most of the songs is melody and lyrics, they better be very good. So it puts pressure on me to try to stand up. I think that's what is going to make this record an evolution of what I've been trying to do.

It's just so much more fun collaborating, but I've found that I don't really enjoy being collaborative on lyrics. Those I feel are super personal. Even if someone's idea is probably better than mine, I don't like it and need to choose my own, which is stupid and stubborn. But for all the instrumentals and top lines and stuff, I need to work with other people because it's just so much more fun and exciting, and feels like we're pushing things further that way.

Is there something that you're looking for specifically when you're collaborating with people?

I was doing writing sessions for this new album almost a year and a half ago. Even though I've had stuff come out, I've been writing for the purpose of it, but every session was just a one-off here and there, and I saw nothing really stick.

And then I did sessions with my two friends in Toronto and every puzzle piece made sense, and writing was so obvious. I think I was seeking out a lot just trying to find that missing puzzle piece.

When I go to LA and do sessions, or I'm in New York or whatever, very quickly I can discern, oh yeah, this is something. I can tell really quickly that you're someone that I trust and that also has a weird brain, which is exciting and I want to see what it does.

I think as someone that does not come from music scenes at all, you can get into this trap of writing with other people where there's no personal connection. They are doing sessions all the time so they have this rhythm that they go through, and you can feel like you're just a part of this equation they plug you into.

Someone told me once that if a writing session is not going well-this is so narcissistic and conceited, but I do think they are good words to live by-if a writing session doesn't feel good, and you leave a writing session feeling like you're a bad musician, it was just not the right fit. You should leave sessions feeling like your cup is so full, like you can write anything, and you're the best musician in the world.

I did enough sessions where I felt really shitty and I didn't know what to say, or couldn't come up with anything. But no, there probably just wasn't the right chemistry in the room that allowed you to give your best ideas and feel comfortable saying a bunch of bullshit so that the right stuff comes out at the end.

You're pretty involved in the recording process and everything?

For the most part yeah. For this album, definitely. For the last few EPs, I didn't realize the guy that had co-written and produced it had done so much, and put so much time and effort into it. We would record, and overnight until the next morning, he would fully comp everything and he would develop it so much further, which I didn't really realize how much work was going into it. Now that I'm so hands-on, basically producing, co-producing the whole thing, I want to be there for everything.

I also think the whole point of this, obviously we want to create really beautiful music, but everyone is creating incredible music all the time. The only thing that makes it my music is my own litmus test of whether I like things or not. I don't know if that means it's the best choice sonically, but I think it's important to feel really, really good. And even if something feels bad, let it get to a place where it feels good again. Trust it until I see what someone's vision is fully.

I've put stuff out where I just felt lukewarm on, and that doesn't change, you're still going to feel that way in five years. So the time when you can change your feelings towards the song is in the recording process. So now I want to be super, super stoked on everything the whole time.

Do you find that it's easy to trust your instincts there and you really know when something's working?

I think when it's correct, yes. I think what's harder is just not knowing the path through. The in-between place when you know something is wrong, and then you just have to try a bunch of things. You have to change tempos, you have to change keys, you have to change whatever parts. During that exploratory part where you're trying to figure out what is wrong in the first place, I find it very hard to trust myself and know what is wrong, because I don't have a musical background. But it's great when you have friends that you're working with that can be like, okay, I have three ideas and they aren't going to work, you have three ideas, and you have three, and one of them is the solution.

What does your ideal creative work-life balance look like?

I would like to have the creative process bleed into my life a little bit more. I think I'm really intentional. I didn't grow up journaling or doing a lot of things that I find my friends do, and they have creativity coming out of their pores. I've noticed these patterns that they do, that I don't think they've had to form as habits. It was just like, "What are outlets for this?" I want this for my goals for this next year, tapping into that more and also exploring creativity in other disciplines. I want to get more into visual art. I don't feel like I can make visual art, but I want to consume it and appreciate the history of it more, along with fashion, makeup, and architecture.

I would also like to pivot from being a musician, into an artist in all senses, and really try to prioritize that. Because I think when you're operating at that level, that's when really cool stuff happens. I think architecture should be able to influence an album cover. It should all flow together, which is maybe obvious, but it doesn't come that naturally to me.

I think I'm happiest when I'm doing it 90 percent of the day. I think it's just something that I'm enjoying so much right now that it's kind of consuming my every waking moment.

Right now, I'm writing this album and I'm trying to squeeze out inspiration in every single second of my life. Or if I'm on TikTok, I should be looking for things that are inspiring me. I'm seeking it out at all times, which is a little silly. Right now there isn't a ton of balance, but I like it. And there will be balance in different ways in different seasons, but right now I have a big project that I'm scared about, so you got to make it good,

so let's get inspired.

Do you ever get writer's block, or how do you prevent creative blocks from happening?

I think I get writer's block all the time in every session that I do. There are always going to be blocks that happen. You should treat yourself cyclically, you're going to go through periods where you just need to be intaking.

I just recently went through this really crazy eight-month interpersonal insane relationship situation, where everything that I tried to write about it was so horrible, and not at all what I think the core of those feelings were.

I'm trying to write about it in real time because this is something that's actively plaguing me. And a lot of people are just like, you need to wait and experience it because you don't even know what is actually happening. In these moments, we're not self-aware enough to know that we are developing these really good or bad habits. Now that I've had a few months away from it, I'm able to be like, okay, these were my actual takeaways and this is actually what I was thinking.

I think just having that balance and then again, when I'm having blocks—while working with people that inspire me so deeply, it's impossible to not get excited about what you're working on and come up with these ideas, and have these things just spill out of you when the people around you are so talented.

Do you need certain things in place to write?

I think it's a mix. I write whenever I'm feeling it, but I also try to be diligent in getting a few ideas down every once in a while. With TikTok on my phone, and being busy with numbers and stuff with music, a lot of time can pass if you're not being intentional about it. Letting it strike even when it's not, just try to write a little bit to get it out of your system.

I wonder if it's a bad personality trait, but anything that I go through that's shitty, I'm writing down very visceral feelings and details so I can use it for music later, which is a coping thing.

Basically journaling with a little bit of an intention behind it. Trying to write down as specific as possible so that other people can relate and feel like they're not alone in it.

What is something you wish someone told you when you started to make music?

That it's possible. That the internet exists. And it does not matter how big or small your town is. You can make it and people can hear you now. I grew up in the prairies of Saskatchewan and I always thought that was the most boring thing in the world, but try to romanticize the things that are deeply personal to you, because that's what makes you unique. I was really shying away and was trying to pretend that I wasn't from this small, boring city, but I think everyone's from a small, boring city.

How do you make time to celebrate some of the big milestones that you're achieving?

I've been trying to bring my friends along to things with me. For the JUNO's, I brought my boyfriend and got to celebrate with him. When I'm playing shows that I thought I'd never be able to play, I'm trying to have my friends come with me, so we can celebrate it together in real time.

And then just taking little moments for yourself because everything starts to feel normal. I'm doing things this year that two years ago I would've been freaking out about, but now I'm like, "What is next?" I think just every day taking a little bit of time to just be like, "This is awesome. I'm so grateful for this." Every day feels crazy that I get to do this as my job and that people can hear what I'm writing about.

A big game changer has been bringing my friends and family along to things. I'm making sure that the people I'm really close with are around me for the things that might not necessarily feel important to me at the time, just because I've gotten used to them. These people that are on the outskirts of music, they think these things are really exciting, so it reminds you that they are really exciting.

Katie Tupper recommends:

Submarine by The Marias: I've been obsessed with this album for the past few months. I've been touring a lot, so I've been turning to this album during long drives and when I'm getting ready for shows. It's beautiful and textured and synthy. I love it so much.

Vit Béo: This is an amazing Vietnamese fusion restaurant in Toronto that I can't stop eating at when I'm in the city. It's super casual and counter service, which makes it cool. If you go, you have to get the PKB, which is this insanely perfect stewed beef noodle dish. The pho is great too.

Psyche.co: Psyche is this really awesome digital magazine that talks about psychology, philosophy, and art. I've been trying to turn to this instead of mindless scrolling, and it makes my brain feel better.

NYT app: I've been doing the NYT crossword on this app whenever I remember, and it's such a nice way to start my morning or end my day. I also do Wordle, and I've accepted that I'm not good at it, but that does not stop me.

Mary Oliver: Mary Oliver is an American author and poet who I've started reading recently, and it fills me with hope and happiness. Her writing is a really beautiful observation on nature and the human condition. *Wild Geese* and *Dog Songs* are two of her books that I love.

Name

Katie Tupper

Vocation

musician

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