

On being true to yourself in your creative work



Musician Laufey discusses the magic of orchestras, growing up in a culture that fosters artistic growth, and how being authentically herself has brought her more success than ever.

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As told to Mána Taylor, 2121 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Identity](#), [Success](#).

How are you feeling this year so far?

Oh my god. I mean, I definitely feel overwhelmed, but in a good way. A positive, overwhelming feeling. Really, really just—yeah, it's very cool. It's nothing I could have expected, especially growing up in Iceland.

What's a typical day for you when you're not touring?

Oh, I haven't had one in a second. I mean, I honestly just wake up, maybe go to a workout class, like a Pilates class, get a coffee, sit at a coffee shop, read, journal, maybe write, have dinner with a friend. Call my parents.

You just said that you couldn't have predicted this having grown up in Iceland, but there is a strong music community there, and many people who have become successful worldwide.

For sure. Yeah. I think it was just like, I knew that being an artist was never a surprise, which I think in contrast to my American peers who—I mean now they're all artists—but growing up I had friends who weren't, and it seemed like being an artist was this incredible risk that parents often didn't approve of. I think that's the part, right? Whereas in Iceland, it felt like this thing that more than half of the people I knew at least attempted some sort of art form or school or studying it, whether it was writing or acting or music. At some point in their life, it was a part of them becoming an adult.

And now I'm 25, and graduated high school there six years ago. To this day, there are kids who have just finished up their economics degree and they're going to acting school in England. The society fosters artistic development and artistic risks. I think being an artist was never a surprise, but I think being an artist in this way was a bit of a surprise to me.

That makes a lot of sense.

Especially within this genre. I think there's so many amazing classical or ambient composers and artists who have found a lot of success that I think really had Iceland as a forefront in their creative and in their musicality, and they've kind of stayed in Iceland, but this leaving and being so far away from home is something that I think is new or was surprising to me.

Have there been times when you didn't think you could do this, or you felt like you wanted to pursue something

else?

Yeah, of course. I mean, I kind of didn't believe that any of this was possible in high school, so I was just studying really hard in other fields and practicing cello really hard. If anything, classical music seemed more of a reasonable route, but yeah, I didn't expect this to happen. I feel like everything was a little bit of an accident that just continued. I applied to universities to study economics, and the only one I applied [to] for music was Berkeley, which is the only [school] that gave me a full scholarship. So I was like, "Oh, I guess I should go." And everything just kind of continued on with each other. I don't think I believed enough in myself until I had already started putting out music, which is crazy.

Yeah, it does feel like it happened really fast.

It's very wild. It feels like a lot has happened, but it's definitely been fun.

I was wondering also, since you've said in other interviews that you have often felt like an outsider. I feel like sometimes the way people talk about you is often in these boxes, like "jazz icon," or something, but I do find that you have really managed to stay true to yourself in an elegant and beautiful way. So, how would you say you stay true to yourself when there are all these forces trying to put you in a box?

Yeah, I mean, I think it's human nature, especially in the music industry to want to box an artist in, especially when you start to gain more of a commercial audience as well. What's a word that we can tag onto someone to...Like a tagline. I never conform to anything. I'm half Icelandic and half Chinese, but I also spent time growing up in the States. I've never been able to answer who I am or where I'm from in one sentence. And I think the same thing has happened with my music. I can't really answer, give you an answer to what I am and what I do with one sentence. It's so much more complex than that, and I think humans are so complex like that as well. So, I don't know. I feel like I'm truer to myself than I've ever been.

And I am lucky. I feel like whenever I lean into who I truly am and my authentic artistic vision or musical vision, that's when I seem to find the most success. So, I guess I'm just really lucky in that my audience is good at sniffing up the authenticity and it's amazing because it's really just allowed me to be exactly who I am and when I make artistic choices, I am making choices for myself as well. It all is very natural.

Like with *Bewitched*, my last album, I just allowed myself to be completely who I am, and I didn't really think too much about how to make it relevant for a younger audience or how to make it interesting for people. I just made exactly the music I wanted to make. And now even down to the way I dress, or the way I live life, or down to which neighborhood I decide to visit in a day, or live in—I feel like I just do exactly what I want to do, and I'm lucky for that. I think the secret to my authenticity is simply that I've always had support in it. That's when I've been the most successful.

***Bewitched* felt very thematically strong to me. Does the process of composition and songwriting come naturally to you?**

I knew what *Bewitched* was going to be from the very beginning. I knew before I wrote even a song on *Bewitched* that it was going to be called *Bewitched* and it was going to play with these little witchy-starry themes. And I knew visually I wanted to represent that as well. I think I still wrote the songs I wanted to write, but I always found ways to either lyrically or musically tie it back to the core.

There are a lot of beautiful lyrics, but also a lot of funny ones. Does humor play a part in your process?

I think there are two things that have inspired me in that sense. I think the first, is this musical theater writing from the '30s and the '40s. A lot of the lyrics are quite funny and unserious and many of them [are] from comedic musicals. I think a lot of the Cole Porter tunes for example have an air of humor to them, and that's the music I listened to growing up. So, I always kind of kept that air of humor. But I think the second is that Icelanders are really sarcastic and nobody takes themselves that seriously. You can talk about a heartbreak that you've been through for an hour, and then at the end of it you'll just end it with a joke and be like, "Well, I'm

better off and he's going to rot in hell," something like that. [Laughs] It's like, it's a very unserious culture. Everyone's very sarcastic. I think everyone's hiding behind their emotions a bit. So I can't take myself seriously writing a super sappy love song without kind of poking fun at myself in the middle of it.

I am curious, how have you dealt with your personal lyrics about romantic relationships being so public now that you're more in the spotlight of fame?

People often ask me about that. When I'm writing, I'm just not really thinking about it. My songs all have an air of ambiguity to them. There are very few songs that are entirely autobiographical. Most of them are intrusive thoughts that turn into a story. So even if the song is close to what happened, there's always something that makes it just a little bit ambiguous. And I think it's kind of up to the listener to figure out what the song means to them. And because of that, I'm not too worried about it.

Every album has love songs and breakup songs, and you can experience love or the most toxic relationships, and write about that. You can also experience heartbreak and the most beautiful relationships or sad moments, and write songs about that. So, there's so much that can go into writing an album.

I don't feel like that specifically has been an invasion of privacy or anything. I guess it's like it's a part of the artist's job nowadays. You show the world your music and your stories, and then you show them your life story as well via photos and captions or whatever. But yeah, I mean, it's very public. It's definitely very public. I'm choosing to put my face out there to support my music and support my story. But it's all right.

Can you tell me about performing with the Philharmonic orchestras around the world?

It's so amazing. I grew up within the walls of the symphony because my mother's a violinist in the Iceland Symphony. So I just kind of grew up in that world, and it was a very natural transition for me to learn about that world and get sonically introduced to the orchestra. But it's something that I think is increasingly hard for young audiences to access, just because it's scary and it's not something that is... I mean, it's just not something that is accessible anymore. Everybody who listens to my music has a part of them that enjoys that kind of symphonic sound, and I obviously love incorporating it into my music. To get to bring that experience to new audiences that maybe didn't have the opportunity to go before is really, really special.

There are so many barriers to entry to going to the symphony. How to dress, where to get my ticket, when to clap, is there an intermission? It is also super expensive. There's so much etiquette involved, and it's something that I really want to introduce to a new generation of listeners, and I want to introduce it as something that is not quite as serious as it's painted to be. I mean this music-classical music-was the pop music at its time.

It's been really fun. Even just on a personal level, to bring these songs alive in an orchestral setting. It makes everything so beautiful and cinematic. Getting to play with these orchestras that I heard about and listened to and was in awe of growing up is just really, really cool.

I can see that. Especially since a lot of what you were saying before about Bewitched was recorded with an orchestra, when I saw a video of the performance it felt like you were breaking the barriers of what music is. I was seeing it all there instead of hearing something pre-recorded. I feel like people forget that there's such a beauty to that—to all the instruments of the orchestra being able to play those witchy-starry sounds you wanted, like the chimes.

Getting to experience a symphony orchestra playing, and hearing sixty musicians on stage who've trained since they were little kids their entire life...there's just no sound like it—in a room that's also built as an instrument. Yeah, there's nothing like it. It's a 360 experience. It's not about being near a speaker. Every seat is a good seat. I'm so passionate about classical music and music education. It's given me everything. So it's prepared me for my life, I would say.

Laufey Recommends:

The Summer Book by Tove Jansson: The sweetest summer read. And it's short and it's easy. It's like a children's book for adults.

Past Lives: Obviously. It's a great movie.

Reykjavik Roasters: I mean, it's literally in Iceland but everyone wants to go there anyway.

The Loewe Tomato candle: Very specific, but it's burning right now, and I love it.

Blue nails! Light blue, cornflower blue, cobalt blue, navy blue. The one I'm wearing now, somebody called it Girlfriend Blue, and I don't know why but that really struck me.

Name

Laufey

Vocation

musician

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Gemma Warren