On being true to yourself



Songwriter Lucy Dacus on the continued evolution of her creative practice, understanding your parents, navigating online spaces, and what it means to write with intention.

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As told to Leah Mandel, 2953 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Inspiration, Beginnings, Success, Mental health.

Why are you putting out a record based on holidays? How did this idea come to you?

I recorded a lot of these songs just because I wanted to be in the studio. I didn't know when they would come out, or how they would come out. I'll just book a day or two in the studio every couple months so we can play around and stay in touch with that part of the creative process. It also eases the tension of making the next record—instead of only being in the studio to make a really high-stakes, personal statement.

These are just fun, and came simply from the enjoyment of the recording process. I saw them all sitting on my computer, with no one hearing them, and got kind of sad. It felt like a good excuse, and a good template. I've found it reassuring that I'll be putting out music every couple months for the entire year.

"My Mother and I" came out for Mother's Day. What's your relationship like with your mom?

She's my friend, and I feel like that's us at our best: as friends. I'm happy that I'm old enough to exist that way with her. I think a lot of kids feel that way, like when they move out of their parents' house you can kind of see that they're people. I like asking friends, "When did your parents become people to you instead of just parents?" Everybody has either a specific story or a general period of time where they come to understand that their parents were once young, and have a full past, and aren't just mom and dad.

We're at that point. I really like her as a person, which is great. We've had a couple talks about the song. At first, she really didn't want it to be about her. She was like, "Oh, that's not about me, is it?" She thought it was some fictional character. But we talked about it, and I think she understands the use of expressing some of these more difficult aspects of mother-daughter relationships.

I [am] somebody that is really glad to be adopted. I'm so grateful that I was—and to my birth mother for making the sacrifice and knowing she couldn't be a mother. And my parents for being willing to raise me. My parents raised me thinking that I was who I am. I didn't grow up in the shadow of their DNA, or their personalities, or what they saw as their weaknesses. I watched my brother grow up, who was related to them, and I feel like he had to contend with their insecurities and what they didn't like to see in each other and in themselves all the time. I think people should stop having kids and just adopt. Not only do genetics not matter, it's actually, I think, beneficial to raise somebody that you're not related to.

You just got your first tattoo. With Julien Baker and Phoebe Bridgers, of boygenius. What's the tooth about?

The tooth is about "Bite The Hand." It was Phoebe's idea. We all wanted them on our hands but we were talked out

of it by our [tattoo] artist, because they fall out. That song is about biting the hand that feeds you, aka not feeling beholden to people that give you money. Your fans support you, and we're all really thankful—but the three of us can really easily slip into this idea that in order to respect the fans, you need to do what they want. I don't think that's healthy at all.

This song is about remembering fans don't have the right to come up and touch you. They don't have the right to have photos if you're in a bad head space. You don't have to have a one-on-one therapy session with people after the show. Even if everyone has the best intentions, they don't understand how taxing that can be, or the depths of emotion that requires after you've already done a show, which is depleting of your energy in the first place. It's not only a reminder to each other, it's a reminder that we need to be true to ourselves.

The first time I interviewed you, it was after you had just put out a few singles. We were talking about how you quit film school to work on music full-time. Then I saw you play at Baby's All Right, and the next year you were selling out Brooklyn Steel. It's been rocket-like—not your standard path.

It does feel really abnormal. But finding a couple of people who are also on this path is really grounding. Julien and Phoebe are prime examples. All of us picked up at high speed. I like to have people who are like, "Yeah, this is normal for the couple of us." 'Cause if I'm like, "This is abnormal." I can start to feel disoriented. I've had to get used to it without feeling entitled to it. That's the big balance. I still feel like at any moment people could stop listening, and then I'd have to go back to my nine-to-five.

Speaking of nine-to-fives, what was your day job? You don't have to have one anymore, right?

I worked at Richmond Camera, a photo lab. My job was essentially bulk editing. Photographers from schools would send in yearbook photos and I would edit the kids' hair. We'd make the images ready to put on mugs, key chains, all the stuff that parents want, trinkets and things. And it was hilarious because kids are so funny looking, at all ages. It was also mindless. Mindlessness and mindfulness are so close. I felt so at peace doing that job. It was repetitive, and I could get into a trance. I would listen to music all day long. I had a pad of paper next to me, so whenever I thought of lyrics I would write them down.

I was working there when your first piece came out about "I Don't Want to be Funny Anymore." I was there when all the press began happening. I wasn't trying to quit that job. I was happy there, and I would get home and the job would have taken nothing out of me. I had all this time to think, and have ideas. I'd walk home, sing to myself, and then get to the guitar and write a song. Almost every day I'd write a song. I had eight hours of emptiness. I look back on that time as really fruitful. And I wonder, sometimes, how to recreate that. I feel way busier now. Now, my job title is Lucy Dacus, so I can't go off the clock.

Do you have things that you do to attempt to get back to that space, that not-so-busy or empty mindset?

I haven't figured it out. Walking is always really helpful. I'm doing an action that requires movement, but not much thought. That's when I write a lot of songs. If someone was like, "Your nine-to-five is now sitting in this room and writing songs," I would probably write way less because I would be trying too hard. I kind of have to write accidentally, which isn't very encouraging. I wish I could sit down and write, the way some people can. Now it's like I'm crossing my fingers, hoping that songs still happen. They have been, which is good. But definitely not as frequently as when I was working at the photo lab. But I am gonna start using a room in my house as an office and see how that feels.

I heard that Nick Cave used to get into a suit and sit at a desk and write that way. I really like hearing about people's rituals around work. I might just try on some of other people's methods to see if any of that works for me.

Maybe something different will come out. It could just be a different way of writing. Do you have any writing or working habits that you have to fight against?

When I get a lyric idea, it's usually when I'm out and about and the only thing I have is my phone. I'll open a

Google doc on my phone and type lyrics down. But there's that thing that happens when I turn on my phone and intend to write something down—the light just wipes my memory, or there's a notification, or an email, or somebody needs something from me. And then I forget the line. So I've been carrying around one of those little Muji notebooks and a pen and paper on me.

Recently, I've been dropping songs in the middle that I don't feel like I'll end up sharing. Sometimes I'll write something and I'll think, "This only would be interesting to me. I don't need to show anybody." And there are some things that I write and I'm like, "This is definitely applicable to anybody." I feel like half the work I make I deem useless for the general public. And I don't share it, and then I don't finish the song. Even if it *is* just for me, I should finish those songs. Writing is and was and will always be something that helps me to get to know myself better.

Another horrible habit that I have not even once rerouted, and I really need to figure out how to stop doing: I'll get a really great idea right before going to sleep, and then I'm so tired and I'm like, "That's so good, I'm gonna remember it in the morning." And then never, ever do I remember it in the morning. I repeat it to myself and go to sleep singing it in my head. I'm like, "Of course I'm gonna remember that. I don't need to write it down." And it absolutely never happens.

How do you approach online spaces and social media? I love your Twitter presence, and I see that people make memes about boygenius, and about your songs. What does that mean to you?

I love the memes because they feel really low-stakes. Twitter feels really casual to me—you say something and it's quickly swept into the void. A lot of people are willing to be truthful and also a little careless. The best thing for me is to have no rules for myself. People like to preemptively think about their "brand," and become that. Your brand—or your personality, or whatever you want to call it, it's weird that you would equate the two—it's there already. You have one without trying to have one. So when you're true to that, people respond to it. You don't have to *try* to have a brand. It just exists.

It's something I wish someone had told me as a kid. You don't have to try to be anybody, you are somebody. Some days I want to be really stupid, so I'll say stupid stuff on Twitter. And then other days I'm like, "I don't want to be personal. I just want to post the show that's coming up." Or someone behind the scenes is like, "Hey, could you please do this?" Sometimes it's as thoughtless as that. I have management or a venue or something saying, "We would like you to do this." And I'm like "Cool, I appreciate that you're letting me come play your events. I will do what you've asked."

But it changes day to day. Sharon Van Etten does that too on her Instagram; sometimes she's just like, "Went on a nice walk." And other times she's like, "Doing this amazing thing I thought I'd never do." Patti Smith on Instagram is such a great example of what social media can be. She has these images that are beautiful and then the captions are a poem in her style. Her Instagram is like reading a book of hers; these short, sweet moments of sharing. I really feel like she's sharing something that she's put thought into. Phoebe [Bridgers] on Twitter—you can hear her laughing in the background, anything that she posts. You can just imagine Phoebe cracking herself up, like bellyaching, with laughter. If people stopped thinking about what their social media looked like, it would just start to look like them.

Also I do a thing for my own health which is I don't look at the phone unless I am doing something specific. I will only open my phone if I'm responding to an email, or sending one, or I have to make a post. But as soon as I realize that I'm scrolling, I put down the phone.

You mentioned books—this is another thing that I like about your social media presence: you're always talking about books. "Hit me up on Goodreads. I think I'm just @lucydacus on there" really cracked me up because it's so nerdy and pure. What are some great books that you've read recently?

Right now I'm reading *Sister Outsider* by Audre Lorde and I'm just underlining the whole thing. It's so poetic and beautiful. She's totally the queen. I read *Jazz* by Toni Morrison. That was amazing. I'm gonna read everything she's ever written now. I'm also reading Hanif Abdurraqib's new book, *Go Ahead in the Rain*, about A Tribe Called

Quest. I feel way more connected to that band, and to him. He has such a unique way of bringing care out of people. With *They Can't Kill Us Til' They Kill Us*, I felt like he encouraged more compassion out of me with every essay.

Julien just had me read *The Left Hand of Darkness*, by Ursula K. Le Guin, which is awesome and totally sci-fi and nerdy. I've grown a heart for sci-fi in the past year or two 'cause it's so different from the real world. It feels like a hard exit. When I'm in the van, it's nice to jump into something that's completely different from where I am. I mean, I can go on. I have been reading a lot of books. I'm always reading the *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. It's a spiritual text that is everything I want from a spiritual text. Always talking about how to live in a way that makes you be at peace with your death, and how that can proliferate into your relationships. Getting rid of unhealthy attachments. I read a paragraph at a time and I feel like I'm sated spiritually for a month.

What's changed since *No Burden* came out?

The difference between then and now has a lot to do with intention. I intended *No Burden* to be listened to by my friends and family. It was listened to by many more people, and it took me off guard. A lot of things happened beyond what I expected and I was shrugging my way through all of that. Like, "I don't know what's going on, but I'm here for it." With *Historian*, I got to be more intentional, responsible, and aware of what goes into people listening to a record.

That filtered into the writing and recording process. People talk about sophomore stress or whatever, and for me it's like sophomore *awareness* for that record. I wasn't stressed, but I was thinking, "People are gonna hear this. I want to do the best we can. I want to say things I really believe in. I want people to know something about me that at the core is who I am." Whereas *No Burden* was like, "I've just written a bunch of songs over time and they don't really have much to do with each other but we picked the ones we liked the best."

I can own *Historian* more than *No Burden*. I'm still surpassing what I thought to myself all the time. Getting used to it and not entitled to it is the constant goal. I look to the future, and I can't really imagine what comes next except for making the next record. One step at a time is a pretty good maxim.

Lucy Dacus Recommends:

Things That Might Make You Feel Better

Before you get dressed every day, stretch and plank for one minute. It takes very little time and you'll have set out on the day doing something good for yourself.

Honestly, watch Bob Ross before bed. I was dubious, but that show is so relaxing and gentle and quietly wise. I fall asleep so soundly after watching.

Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, but Reduce is first! Find ways to stop using single use items. Get a keep cup, shake your hands dry and wipe them on your clothes (they'll dry and you won't be using a paper towel), buy unpackaged snacks, unsubscribe from mail that you throw away, etc.

Don't scroll. Use your phone when you have a purpose in mind, like communication, searching, and creating (like the camera or notes), but try to stop yourself when you notice yourself scrolling.

Hang out with babies and elders. Get humbled.

These are some records I listen to when I'm on a plane that is experiencing turbulence, but I imagine they'd work in a variety of stressful situations:

Haley Heynderickx - *I Need To Start A Garden*
Grouper - *Dragging A Dead Deer Up A Hill*
Tomberlin - *At Weddings*
Lomelda - *M For Empathy*
Gillian Welch - *Time (The Relevator)*

Have compassion for your past self.

Name

Lucy Dacus

Vocation

Musician

Photo credit: Elizabeth Weinberg