On creating fearlessly



Musician Lucy Liyou discusses remaining authentic in your creative process, trusting your intuition, and finding the joy in working through an intentional vision.

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As told to Sue Park, 2436 words.

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You're a Korean-American artist, and it can be difficult to create art while feeling pressured to write from a specifically "Korean-American perspective." How do you navigate expectations of how your art might be interpreted while remaining faithful to your own artistic intentions?

Is it bad that I don't really think about intention? My job isn't to babysit people and help them understand my relation to "the Korean American experience." It's a little patronizing to intentionally coddle people through these narratives and ideas and intentions. I think my music does a lot of the explanation for me, because I already do that work for myself. You can do that work if you want to.

And on that note of letting the music speak for itself, your music used to be more text-to-speech-oriented: heavier, more ambient. You have a distinctly different sound these days, with a lot more piano and vocals, and I was wondering how your creative process has changed over the past few years—I remember you once hilariously said you just "shit it out."

Absolutely, I just shit it out. But beyond that, I wanted to avoid using the piano as much as possible in my earlier work because I really wanted to understand how to utilize different methods and ideas and musical approaches to express an idea: the individual transmogrification of each element. I took that really seriously in the beginning, but then I grew more comfortable with the idea that these instruments and arrangements are not as strictly independent as you'd think. They're all in conversation with one another. So we can think about the piano also having a life of its own as a vocalist, and conversely, we can think about the actual sounds coming out of the voice, rather than just the words. It's still a shitting out, but intentionally in that I feel more comfortable just allowing things to exist, rather than trying to focus on a strict methodological approach.

That's very producer-minded of you. There's often, for lack of a better term, a neutering of craft. Methodological process is often treated as a very sterile thing, but you manage to put so much emotion into these deeply precise arrangements.

It's approaching music with this fearlessness of pretending that nobody else is going to hear it: that I can truly talk about any topic that I want to. But beyond that, it's an immediacy in how my source material and inspirations flow directly into the work. *Dog Dreams (□□)*, was inspired by dreams that I had, and I had started working on those pieces as soon as I'd woken up. So it's just that immediacy, but also that perception of limitlessness that really propels an emotional proximity and intensity.

Specifying a "perception" intrigues me because the end result of your creative process still reflects that limitlessness, whether you truly believe it or not. How do you push past self-doubt?

Honestly, it's just doing it. It's just trying and trying until something feels interesting. Whether that feeling is good or bad, it provides some kind of trajectory of how I can fully interpret what I'm doing. But another part of it is that at the end of the day, music is just sounds. It's just noise. So I think approaching making music with a certain intensity, but also that sense of levity, is helpful. That balanced approach really lets that perception of limitlessness or that fearlessness set in.

That's stunning.

I mean, you're a fucking writer, you know this.

It's important to have levity, of course. And as a writer frequently paralyzed by fear, I very much admire that you can just go for it. Which leads me to ask–not to be glib, but your process is quite vibe-oriented. Still, you delve into heavy subjects, and it's also interesting that the press surrounding your work often paints you as a narrator telling stories, when many of these subjects are deeply personal to you. How do you go about reconciling difficult memories with the works you've created around them?

Again, I think it's that sense of immediacy. For the middle piece of *Dog Dreams*, I had a terrifying dream that I really wanted to flesh out as soon as I woke up: get to work, just figure out what's going on in there. And I guess what also allows me to address these very personal, even traumatic moments, is the fact that music is just abstraction. When you allow certain pieces of sound–chord structures or arrangements or even just random noises–to hold such personal meaning, it provides a sanctuary to really remember; this moment is what this part represents, for me. That's what music is a lot of times: the work of projection, and the work of abstraction. That creates many opportunities for me to create stuff addressing difficult times.

I love that explanation. You're hardworking in a markedly interior way. And you *are* acclaimed, so let's just get that out of the way. But I'm curious as to how your drive to create for yourself, and yourself alone, has evolved since you started making music.

In high school, it started as a rejection of this insane amount of work I was putting into classical piano. It wasn't making me happy, and it wasn't allowing me to reach these ideas or feelings that I'd really wanted to express in music. It was an act of rebellion in the most immature way, but it's funny because that rebellion was also work, in terms of feeling like I had to find out where I belonged sonically. Even throughout college, I was just constantly trying things out. I guess that's the interior work that you're talking about, where I'd search for a musical space or language that really spoke to me in the same way that some classical pieces spoke to me when I was younger.

I only really started to find it my senior year, when *Welfare* came out. And as soon as I found that language, it turned out not to be anywhere specific to belong, but something that I was just trying out. That's when I really geared my work in a different direction: let's really understand the domain and the parameters of this actual musical language that I am employing.

And a lot of it just comes from a place of comfort. I heard a lot of *pansori* when I was younger. There were certain moments of clarity for me where I'd realize a certain structure was working for me, because I'd see how it connected to my grandparents, or to the first time my mom took me to a *pansori* show in Korea. I think it's these connections that really allowed the interior work to shift from just trying to find a place to belong, to understanding this musical language that I'm still trying to fully employ.

That's beautiful. I feel like when people use the term "world-building," they usually imagine the artist as just *the artist*, acting as a center point and building larger narratives around themselves. To be able to do that on such an internal level is genius, and probably exhausting as fuck. Do you find yourself having to take a break from that process?

Definitely. I allow myself to take that break by looking for sources of inspiration outside of music. I have some peers and friends who listen to music constantly, and I don't do that; I only listen to music when I feel like it,

and I only listen to what I want to. And most of the time it's Mariah Carey.

But it's really just a lot of ideas and work and people from beyond music. Anything can make you think about your work in a different way, and I think having great peers that are outside of music is just as important as having great peers inside it. It just cultivates new modes of thinking.

It really does add dimensionality to the meaning behind one form of media; you did say music is technically just sounds. And a job is a job is a job, but there's this seemingly automatic mindset of art as a product first, rather than a means of engaging with the world around you. Which segues into the detour I wanted to take about the video game that you released to accompany *Dog Dreams*—I need to know where you got that idea from.

Where do I begin? I knew I wanted to incorporate a visual element, but I thought, a 15-minute video? Are you fucking kidding me? That just sounds crazy. I'm not here to produce a film. And honestly, I was also just unconvinced by a lot of the music videos that I was seeing. Music videos just felt like a promotional element, and to me, the thought of making one felt really empty; it didn't register as something meaningful that I wanted to do.

I was dating my partner, who does computer art and technical 3D art, and he has this fascination with video games of all kinds. I remember a lot of our first dates were him making me play video games like *Bloodborne*. At first I thought, "Hello? Are you kidding?" But then I thought about how immersive these games are in such different ways, and how each artistic element would correspond with one another and with the game itself. So I figured I'd try to make a very simplistic game where visual elements could marry with the music that I was making. In it, the terrain shifts the entire time, almost indefinitely; again, there's that perceived limitlessness, and I love how you can experience that physically. I love the end correspondence with the music, too, and just how those two can work in tandem. It was definitely difficult because the song is so long and there's only so much that we can do with the allotted time, but it's something I want to explore more in the future. I'm really happy with it.

I love that concept of letting the player walk around and experience this constant shift alongside the music. When you extricate yourself from the creative process, though, how do you take the time to care for just yourself?

Besides *The Real Housewives*, I've thought about this for a long time because the music I make is very draining. I'm sure it's extremely draining to listen to, but it's also very draining to make. But somehow, the way for me to push through that is making more music. Something I really stress within my process in general is that not everything has to come out and be a project; you can just make something to make something. I think the best way that I take care of myself is doodling, but with music.

I don't like a lot of what I make, but it's fun, it's entertaining, and it's also exciting. When I'm belaboring over certain ideas or certain elements, it allows me to keep a relative distance from what I'm trying to finish, and it also reminds me of how exciting this process can continue to be.

Continuing to rediscover the joy in your work can be laborious, especially with the added pressures of the outside world: from labels and shows and all the things that come as a package deal with being an artist. Returning to this idea of a self-perceived limitlessness driving you forward, how do you maintain that outlook in the face of very real, rigid external barriers?

It's hard. I can admit that, and I wish more people did publicly. I know a lot of people talk about how hard it is behind the scenes, but I wish more people also talked about how difficult it is to want your music to sustain yourself artistically and emotionally, but also financially. It's so draining, and it just creates so many more barriers than I could have ever imagined when I'd first started making music.

There's a lot of pressure with shows, for sure. I feel the need to do a good job so people want to book me. It's difficult because to me, what people perceive as worth seeing is extremely limited. I think a lot of unconventional performances are so interesting and deserving of an audience. That's the biggest barrier for me, and it's the one that I'm trying the hardest to break. Going on tour, actually, was a bit of an experiment for me

to figure out what was registering with people: finding that equilibrium between what you want and what your audience wants. It's tough in a million ways. I'm still learning.

In spite of how entrenched these limitations can feel, it's awe-inspiring how you continue to maintain the integrity of such a genuinely self-realized creative process. Do you have advice for anyone struggling with feeling inauthentic in their creative output?

Stop pandering and do whatever you want. Let's just say nobody ever wants to hear anything else I do again and I'm just self-releasing for no one except my sister, begrudgingly: at least I can say with utmost confidence that my work has integrity, and that I put everything I wanted to into the music.

Stick to your gut and don't worry so much about what people have to say. That agency is so hard to find in other places within the music industry, so you should at least feel like you have as much agency as possible. I always wonder, who knows what's going to happen after? I might as well feel like everything I'm doing right now is exactly what I want to do.

Lucy Liyou Recommends:

***A Secret Code* by Pamela Z.** She's this incredible electronic artist; any vocal manipulation you hear in pop music, or even just electronic experimental music, she did it first.

Storm & Stress, especially their album *Under Thunder and Fluorescent Lights*.

Through The Looking Glass by Midori Takada. Just really, really beautiful stuff. She's a legend.

Derek Walcott's *Omeros*. I heard he's an absolute criminal with a lot of allegations, so let's take this with a grain of salt. But I was given this book of really beautiful poetry; it's narratives that are interwoven with Homer epics and it's really wonderful.

The painter Faye Wei Wei, who actually is the person who gave me *Omeros*. I think she's one of the most incredible artists that we have right now.

Name
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Vocation
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