

On living with doubt



Musician Marie Davidson discusses DJing as a collaborative practice, the importance of language, and the desire to be understood.

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As told to Max Freedman, 1512 words.

Tags: Music, Collaboration, Process, Promotion, Creative anxiety.

It's been interesting to see a handful of musicians start newsletters within the last year or so. In your November 2024 newsletter, you talked about the newsletter format being your way of writing longer captions for your social media posts. Can you talk more about that reason for starting a newsletter, and other reasons too?

There were two motivations: to have a space to write, because words are really important in my practice—but I am still, to this day, a musician—and to create a space to connect with people outside social media. I don't feel complete as an artist to just promote myself on social media.

Can you tell me more about why words are important to you and how you've worked with words in your creative practice?

I'm someone who's really attached to meaning, for better or worse. I like when things are clear. I'm very "on the money" with words. I also love poetry, so I don't have a problem with abstraction, but I love words. I love language. I love communication. It's really important for me to be able to communicate with other people and to be understood. I've always had a need, even as a child, to be understood.

In your music, I definitely hear an economy with words and a forthrightness.

I'm a generous person when it comes to feelings, emotion, and my capacity to take and give, but I can be also greedy in terms of wanting people to be clear with me. I'll be that person to be like, "What do you mean?" I never thought about it before but... I guess I have an economy with words. I love communication. That's why I'm an artist.

You've worked in band settings and as a DJ, which, to some people, seems like more of a one-person effort. What does collaboration achieve for you? What do you look for in collaborators?

I started my music process with collaborations. It's the root of my practice and my background, so it's my initial point of entry in music. Also, I'm mostly self-taught. I got my music [skills] and social skills through collaborations, playing with different people in bands, duos, trios, ensembles, and different kinds of projects, and I got to learn how to work with sounds by imitation. When you play with people, you listen. I trained my ears to listen and kind of talk back. My first projects were very improv-based, so I had to listen and respond, and this is how I learned how to play music.

I see collaboration as a natural thing. I am working for the music. I'm not working for myself when I work on the composition process. I'm just working for music, and I want to bring the music [to] the best level possible. This is why I've always had people working with me on my songs.

How has collaboration has shaped your social skills and led to your ability to get your music out there?

It shaped my social skills in terms of learning how to work with different people within a short lapse of time, and to do that, you have to be able to communicate and exchange ideas and be in dialogue. I was also a waitress [and bartender], so throughout my early adult life I'd have to engage with so many different people all the time—I think it helped my social skills a lot. I'm a rather lunatic and kind of spacey person, and having to be exchanging with different people at a very fast pace has taught me to navigate the world and learn how to, again, listen and talk back. I think this is the base of social awareness and social skills. You have to not only be able to express yourself—someone who has good social skills is also a great listener. You need to have both.

Soulwax's remix of your song "Work It" has become your most streamed song. Some years after that remix dropped, you're now signed to Soulwax's record label, Deewee. What do Soulwax bring to the table for you as collaborators? Why have you chosen to expand your creative relationship with them so significantly?

They bring freshness to the process. They are good at bringing a track to a place unexpected. When you work with people who have [lots of] experience, have been producing for so long, you get this thing where they're going to bring you somewhere you would have never thought of because that's their expertise. They hear something in the music that was already there but you would've never thought of going for. They also bring some sort of catchiness.

I'm not a crowd pleaser. I'm someone who writes music that has a strong identity and strong hooks, but I don't have this crowd-pleasing type of brain, and [Soulwax is] good at taking something and breaking it down to make it more accessible sometimes. They're also very ballsy, which is something I have in my music too. I like weird sounds, kind of almost annoying sounds, and their music has personality—they have their touch. I guess it's their very own energy. It's very hard to describe people's energy, but they have kind of a "fucker" energy. There's a lot of humor in what they do and what I do too, so that's why we get along well.

When you started learning proper DJ techniques in 2022, did you face any self-doubt or hesitation? Did you have any feelings of, "I'm not going to do this"? If so, can you talk about how you got through those feelings?

When you start something as an artist, unless you're a natural, the doubts are always present. The way you manage to overcome the doubts is by playing whatever it is that you do. It's just by playing. I had to play, and I played a lot on my own in my studio, and then I played a lot of small parties. I would just say yes to any gigs and feel the response from the crowd [on] the dance floor, and I was like, *Wow. Even with very little technique, it works. People are dancing, they look happy... I can feel it in their body language, so I guess I'm not that bad. *The only way is to practice.

I think if you don't doubt, there's something wrong—you should doubt. Doubting and questioning are very important in a creative process. It makes you work harder, and this is how you progress. The only problem with doubt is that if you let it overtake you, then you're done. It can literally stop you. I don't have this problem. I have many problems, but I don't have this problem. Doubts usually don't stop me. They're scary, but I've always lived with doubt.

You've put out a lot of music in a lot of different styles. If you ever listen back to your prior music, are there any things that you've noticed have remained constant or consistent in your creative approach? What creative elements do you think have evolved?

What has remained is [the] existential tone of my songs. I ask a lot of questions. What has evolved is the humor. My first solo efforts, there's not much humor. Maybe there's a little bit of humor on Un Autre Voyage, which came out in 2015, and then the first tracks that I would consider kind of funny are on Adieux Au Dancefloor, which are naive to the bone and good vibes. Not every song I write is meant to be funny. There will always be some darker elements to what I write about. In terms of music and sounds, I think it's an evolution, but the core of it remains the same. My music is very percussion- and vocal-driven. That has remained.

I don't question myself a lot on those things. I try not to analyze the music too much. I analyze the feeling

when I listen back to what I've been doing, and I'm like, *Does it feel good?* And if it does, then that means it is progressing well, that it's aligned with what I want to share.

To close this conversation out, is there anything more that you want to say about creativity?

I do honestly believe that everyone is creative. I don't mean by this that everyone has to be creative. Some people might not want to engage with creativity, and that's totally fine. But I do believe that everyone is able to [be creative], that everyone has something to say, and people who want to be creative and to express themselves should. There is absolutely no limit to creativity. It's an endless process.

Marie Davidson recommends:

Speak the truth.

Have quality time with yourself.

Try to cultivate empathy towards others.

Generally speaking, try to avoid lying to yourself. Face the facts although it might be uncomfortable at times.

Don't be afraid of making mistakes.

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Vocation

musician

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