On committing to your ideas

Musician Mikaela Davis discusses being uncomfortable, trusting your gut, and taking professional risks.

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As told to Jeffrey Silverstein, 2567 words.

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How did the foundation of your life in music take shape?

I started playing harp when I was eight and studied classically throughout grade school. In high school, I decided I wanted to go to college for harp performance. My teacher at the time, Grace Wong in Rochester, was the principal harpist of the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra. She helped me get my technique together and gave me the foundation for the approach I use today.

She also helped me prepare and audition for the Rochester Philharmonic Youth Orchestra. I was very serious about classical harp at the time. When I was 14 I went to Europe with the RPYO and that gave me my first taste of touring. From that point forward, I knew what I wanted to do. Writing songs and touring with a band was not in the forefront. I was thinking in classical terms, playing with an orchestra. Playing to European crowds when I was a kid was mind-blowing. The happiness I got from exploring new places and experiencing those audiences was ingrained in my mind.

My original idea of how life would pan out was to go to grad school, get my graduate degree, get my doctorate and be a professor at a college or win an orchestra position. That was generally my plan. I didn't get into the conservatories I auditioned for. The one school I got into was the Crane School of Music in Potsdam, NY. Looking back I'm happy I went there, and my harp teacher Dr. Jessica Suchy-Pilalis was an incredible mentor. It was a state university so I'm not hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt. While studying classical harp performance, I was also touring with my band on school breaks and writing music. I was still in school when I was approached by a booking agency.

Did you have reservations about heading down a different path?

I didn't think twice about it. I wanted to tour, to play in a band. I changed my mind about my path without realizing it. It was all just happening. I can't remember a specific moment where I came to that crossroads. I was touring while preparing for classical performances and concerto competitions. Juggling both to the point where unknowingly, I realized I was more passionate about playing songs that I wrote, that my bandmates wrote. Songs where there's no wrong notes. You can do anything you want. That was way more appealing to me than playing the same old pieces by dead guys in an orchestra.

How does classical training translate to songwriting?

As a classical musician, you're taught to read what's on the page. You *do not* stray from that. Playing with an ensemble and improvising has come with a learning curve, but I love it. I'm trying to put myself in an uncomfortable position more often because the outcome is going to be greater than playing it safe all the time.

Did your relationship to music change when you decided to pursue it full-time?

Yes. There are stretches where I don't have time to practice or write because I'm spending so much time preparing for a tour. It can be a bit frustrating. I wish I could go back to that place where it was purely for fun and no one had any opinions about what I should or shouldn't be doing. Being in the public eye, you feel that pressure. Being your own boss can be scary, but it's also the beauty of being an artist. You accept the fact that you're going to fail a hundred times before you succeed. It's just part of the process. Sometimes I forget that.

Have you always felt comfortable being a bandleader?

My whole life I've been the bandleader. I don't have much experience being on the other side. I've been collaborating with people more and more as time goes on. When I was younger, I thought I had to prove to myself that I can write a "good" song by being the sole writer. I thought if you have to collaborate with someone or co-write, it means you can't do it yourself, which is totally false. I love co-writing with my bandmates and collaborating with other artists. It gives you a whole new perspective on how to write a song or how to play music.

How did having more freedom/creative liberties impact your latest album?

My internal critic has held me back in the past, especially when you're working with a label who wants you to deliver something that radio or people are going to like. I've come to learn that being uncomfortable is one of the most important parts and can only lead to bigger opportunities. After putting out *Delivery* with Rounder, they were not going to help me make a new album for another year. I asked them to drop me so I could make it anyway. It was one of the first times I went with my gut instead of going with the flow, doing what I think I'm supposed to do. It was probably the best decision I've ever made. I learned so much from picking up the pieces myself. It's a collection of songs that I'm proud of. All my band members were writers in the process. We were able to record and produce it ourselves without anyone else giving their opinions. The final product is ours. It only belongs to us, and that is really powerful. If you can not care what other people think and be proud of your work, that's the most important part. It's not going to shine through to others if you don't do that.

Is there a core value you look for in other collaborators?

Comradery and trying to lift each other up no matter what. It's cool to find your own path. I don't know another psych-leaning group with a harpist leading. Don't ask yourself, "What should I be doing?" You already know the answer. Don't should all over yourself.

Can you speak to the physicality of your instrument?

The harp is an amazing instrument and also the most cumbersome. It's a weird shape, you lean it on your body and use all four limbs to play it. You're leaning the harp on your shoulder. It's at a balance point so it's not heavy, but you feel the instrument throughout your whole body. It's vibrating through you, an extension of your body and your soul. I've noticed throughout the years how calming it is. It's helped me more than I can imagine. If I'm nervous, when I lean the harp on my shoulder, pretty much every time, that anxiety melts away. I'm just there with my harp. It's like someone is leaning on your shoulder. It immediately makes you feel happy.

Is the harp starting to be recontexualized outside of classical music?

I was taught the Salzedo technique early on. Carlos Salzedo was a French harpist and composer who introduced new techniques and colors on the instrument. Although the harp is maybe the oldest known instrument, the double-action pedal harp as we know it today started to come around in the early 1800s. Then it started to integrate into the orchestra. There wasn't as much solo harp music written until later on. Carlos Salzedo is one of the leading harpists showing that the harp is a virtuoso instrument, that it can do anything.

I discovered Dorothy Ashby and Alice Coltrane when I started to get into jazz. It was mind-blowing to me that a harpist was playing jazz. The harp is not a chromatic instrument. In order to play certain passing tones and chord progressions, you have to move one or more pedals at once while you're playing. It can be difficult to

impossible to do. I’m still learning, always learning. It’s taken me years to figure out how to mic my harp properly–knowing what pickup is usable, what guitar pedals sound good. There’s not many people out there to take influence from. They are out there though. More harpists are integrating their instrument into contemporary music. Whether we like it or not, orchestras are a dying art and people need to be learning more popular music, reinventing their instrument and finding their own niche. It’s something you have to do when you’re a classical musician.

Have you found a community of other harpists?

There’s a community of harpists in most towns and forums online for borrowing or renting harps to help each other out. I’m part of the American Harp Society, a place for harpists to connect and converse about all things harp! That’s a cool thing about social media. It’s much easier to find other harpists when you’re traveling which might be part of the reason why harps are becoming more prominent.

What’s your current relationship to social media like?

I’m barely ever able to turn off that part of my brain. When you’re a musician, you’re always working. You don’t get paid to do all the groundwork, but you get paid to have fun on stage. It’s a weird job. In the last 10 years, social media has become a huge part of that, learning how to promote yourself. Maybe because I’ve been doing it since I was a kid, I’ve gotten a rhythm that works for me. I try to keep it honest, not force anything. That’s when it can get a little dicey.

Do you have a practice regimen?

Recently, not so much. I’ve been touring so often that when I’m home for a week, I need to catch up on sleep. I did an exercise with friends a couple of years ago that was life-changing and very simple. My friend Alex Toth (of Tōth and Rubblebucket) put together a group of songwriters. We had to write a song every day for seven days. This was during the pandemic, so there was nothing else going on.

We had to write and demo a song by the next morning when he would upload all of our demos to SoundCloud. Everyone did that seven days in a row. If you missed a day, you were out of the group. You couldn’t continue and you couldn’t listen to anybody else’s songs. It was tough, but great practice because no one was judging anyone’s work.

We weren’t to share with anybody else. Alex said, “Even if it’s a voice memo of the dumbest melody you’ve ever thought of, and you upload it, I don’t care. It can be anything. It just has to be your song.” I was proud of myself because I’m such a slow writer. It can take months for me to finish or start a song. I get in my head too much. I’ll be nervous if it’s not good enough, which is ridiculous because you have to make bad art to make good art. I try to remind myself of that.

I wrote seven songs in seven days. I have never done that before or after that. I used two of them on my new album, ‘Leave It Alone’ and ‘The Pearl.’ I’ve been meaning to do that again, holding myself to a deadline. I’m a master procrastinator. It’s tough unless someone else is holding me accountable.

What does it look like when a new idea comes to you?

Melodies almost always come first, mostly while I’m driving. I’ll record a voice memo while I’m in my car and hum the melody, then come back to it later and try to make sense of it. Half the time I write on piano. It’s nice to write on a different instrument. I’ll come up with something different than I would’ve on the harp. When I learn it on the harp, I’ll have to figure out a different way to play it because the piano is chromatic, the keys are laid out in front of you. Even if I’m not thinking about the chordal pattern or structure, I’m trying to play what I think sounds cool. Translating that to the harp can be challenging.

What is it about driving?

I tend to keep myself busy all the time. Driving is the only time where I cannot do anything else but drive and be in my thoughts. Without playing music in the car, I'll get into that head space where my mind is racing and then melodies and words, etc. pop into my head. It's the only time I'm in complete silence, especially if I'm alone in the car.

How do you keep track of ideas?

Generally I'll remember it in my head or have it on my iPhone. My goal this winter is to write a new album and set up a small studio with what I have. Demo everything, work more on arrangements. Most of the time I've just plowed through and then there's an album. I haven't really thought about how I want it to look or sound. I want to go about it differently this time and come up with the general idea beforehand. Breaking it down more than just having a voice memo.

That's the thing about having the same band for a long time. It's amazing, but I don't think much about the arrangement because I can write a song, bring it to the band and they'll help me finish it. We make the arrangement at practice, everybody's figuring it out at the same time. I want to look inside myself more and see what I can come up with on my own.

When do you seek feedback?

I often look to my band for their opinion. I trust their intuition and love all of their songwriting. I'm a big fan of their own work, but I've gotten so comfortable with that. I'm always questioning myself and my ideas, wondering, not really knowing, if they're good enough. It's an important practice as a musician to follow through with your ideas, even if you decide not to use them.

What are misconceptions people have of the harp?

People are quick to believe that the harp is more of a showpiece or a gimmick. People see that I'm a harpist and without listening assume, "Oh, it's going to be this acoustic, soft thing." Or, "We'll put them on the acoustic stage." Until someone comes and sees us live, they're not going to know. We stretch out when we're performing and get way deeper into the music. Being a female musician is part of it and can be tough. I try not to think so much about it and do my best. At the end of the day it's about surrounding yourself with people you trust. People that lift you up, people you admire. When you come across somebody you're unsure of, go with your gut feeling.

Mikaela Davis recommends:

Shop vintage! Orange tab Levi's.

Cave Glow Studio candles.

New Music: I discovered Copenhagen artist ML Buch this year and listen to her music on repeat. *Subtub* (2023) just came out, I also really love *Skinned* (2020).*

Tasty treat - Phony Negroni by St. Agrestis topped off with seltzer. Might be better than the real thing.

Handwritten notes.

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