On figuring out who you are



Musician Ninajirachi discusses learning how to create something when you don’t yet know the medium’s jargon, showing up daily as you hone your craft, and not putting needless pressure on yourself.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2584 words.

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You taught yourself music production. What were some challenges with that? What kept motivating you to learn?

I learned everything from YouTube. The hardest thing was not even knowing what I don’t know, so not really knowing what to look up. Once I had watched a really long bunch of tutorials about the general interface of a digital audio workstation (DAW) and what, conceptually, everything is, it was easier.

The challenge was having a problem you want to solve, but not even being able to put words to the problem to type into YouTube to find a tutorial about it. Once I had a tutorial in front of me, it was like, “Okay, great, this is just step one, step two.” But sometimes, when I was younger, I would hear something in music and be like, “I want to learn how to do that,” but I didn’t even know what it was called to Google it.

I can imagine the problem of not being able to Google it being so difficult. How did you solve it?

When I was younger, I didn’t know anyone who made music. I didn’t know anyone in the music industry or anyone closely related to music production. I was so far removed. I didn’t have the understanding or vocabulary to look up how to use a compressor because I didn’t even know that was a thing. I would see it in the list of plugins and be like, “What is the purpose of that?” That was a big block. Once I knew that, “Oh, you use a compressor to do X, Y, and Z, and it’s an important thing to know to achieve A, B, C,” then it’s easy to look up how to use a compressor.

I don’t know how I overcame it. It was just so much time. It probably took me five years of just fumbling around, clicking stuff, and turning things to even become a decent, competent producer. It was just trial and error, honestly. I didn’t have any producer friends to learn things from until I was already releasing music. Before that, I was just clicking things and turning dials until they sounded like a certain thing. I used to use FL Studio, and I would go through, say, Harmor presets or something, and eventually, I probably decided to look up, “what is an envelope?” or something, or “how to get this sound.” It really was a lot of clicking around in the dark.

What you just said makes me wonder: Is there something you wish somebody had told you when you were first starting to make music?

I probably would’ve learned a lot quicker if I knew basic stuff like EQ and compression really early. I would just put things in and happy-accident things together. When I was younger, every good song I made felt like a fluke, but if I listen back to them now, the songs that were good and felt like flukes were actually just because I used sounds that worked well together. They were already pre-compressed in a nice way, or they were EQ’d. There are songs I could have improved when I was younger if I had been able to identify what was wrong with them, and what

was wrong with them might have been like, “There’s five synths all competing here.”

From very young, I’ve never had a problem with ideas, songwriting, structure, melodies, or chords. It just took me a long time to learn the more technical side of things, and it’s just because I didn’t know what I didn’t know. I was dragging and dropping things and clicking around until it sounded good. I also like where I am right now, and I don’t wish I could go back and bestow knowledge on my younger self because then the present might be different, and the present’s pretty good.

Listening to “Sing Good,” I find it really moving how you talk about just wanting to write music because it felt good regardless of your technical proficiency or songwriting chops. To what extent is that still your motivation today? How has that changed?

I don’t really think it’s changed, to be honest. Since my album came out, it’s the first time more than a couple of people have paid attention to my music, and every interview I do, people are asking me, “What’s next?” I think it would be counterproductive to put that pressure on myself because I felt no pressure when I made this album that so many people love and that I love. I could start considering my audience, but you still can’t even know what the audience would like. It would be silly if I made something to appease someone other than myself, and then it flopped and no one’s happy, and I don’t like it and the audience doesn’t like it. It’s only productive to make things I like or think are valuable, because at the end of the day, if I’m the only one who hears it, then I have to be happy with it.

I’ve read you say something along the lines of, “I’m going to take my time with the next album. I’m going to let the success of *I Love My Computer* be a slow burn, not something I rush through.” How has that whole process been going, just living in the moment and not rushing what’s next?

It’s funny because I’ve also never toured this much, and I do feel very inspired at the moment. I didn’t just finish my album and be like, “That’s all I’ve got for now.” I’ve got a lot more music in me, and touring is so fun—I’m having the best time—but it can be frustrating because, sometimes, I just want to cancel everything and go and make music.

It’s just a new thing for me. I’m not used to this cycle where artists will put out an album, and then the next one happens in three years because they’re touring and doing all this other stuff in between. That’s new for me. I’m trying to have patience, but some of the inspiration I have feels very urgent, and it feels kind of wrong to stifle it.

At the same time, it’s really difficult to make music while traveling so much. I used to not understand that. I used to think, “Why couldn’t you make music and tour?” It’s like that feeling of, if you’re on a flight and you get locked in on something, and then you really get in that flow state and you’re like, “Wow, I’m really onto something here.” And then, you have to close your laptop and de-board the plane. It’s like, “Fuck, I don’t want to.” It’s heartbreaking. It’s too hard to get that excited feeling, get on a roll, and then have to stop and start. It’s so nice when there’s just a chunk of time to have a go at it.

You released five EPs before *I Love My Computer*. How do you know when something is an EP versus an album and when it’s done?

I wanted my first album to be really good and meaningful and have something to say, rather than just be a bunch of songs put together. I waited until I had a really strong sense of what my debut album would sound like, look like, and be about. For some artists, maybe that happens at the very start of their career, but it took me a while to figure out who I am or what I have to say. Some artists never release an album too, and that’s cool. Especially in dance music, it’s not always—especially not pop dance, but club dance music—it’s a lot of singles and EPs.

Knowing when a song is finished is a matter, for me, of listening to it with my eyes closed until I can’t hear any to-do list items on it. If I listen to it with my eyes closed and then I write in the Notes app, “That part

is too long” or “That part is too muddy”—I just will keep doing that until it’s like, “I’ve combed over it. There’s nothing to do here.”

In terms of a project being done, for *I Love My Computer*, it was a time thing, honestly. There was meant to be another song on there that got cut because it was just not done. I was like, “12 songs is good. 12 is an album. I’m really glad it’s 12. That’s a nice number.”

For the EP I did called *4x4*, that was easy because I knew I wanted to make a four-track EP called *4x4*. Then, it was just a matter of picking the four songs that felt like they went together. Same with *Girl EDM*. I wanted it to be a sister EP, so it was another four songs, and then, putting them together, 10 felt like a nice number, so then I made it 10 songs. It’s a bit feelings-based. I know that’s a really wishy-washy answer, but that’s the kind of ephemeral thing that’s hard to communicate. You just know what you want to say in your gut.

After you’ve put out a song, have you ever listened back to it and been like, “I wish I had changed that. I wish I had done that instead”?

Yes, all the time. It’s probably a really different experience for artists who produce their own music. If it’s an artist who doesn’t have any hand in the production, or maybe less of a hand in the production, I don’t know how that experience would be.

There’s an Ableton project for every song. I have the projects because I produce them. When I’m making my songs, there’s a thing that they look like. There’s a visual component to making the music on the screen.

Sometimes, if I’m looking at the DAW when I’m making the music for so long, it’s almost like, you can see the timeline of the song, and you can see the clip for every fill and gap. You can see the automation for when something’s muted, so you can almost see when things are coming. That’s why it’s really important for me to know when a song is done, because I need to look away and listen to the song while looking at the wall or anything else, because then it’s less predictive listening. I’m listening as if I’m an audience that didn’t produce the song and can’t see when things are coming. Obviously, I still made the song, so I still know when things are coming, but it gives a slightly more bird’s-eye perspective on the song.

Inspired by your recent Frost Children collaborations, what have you learned about yourself by remixing someone else’s music or having your own remixed?

This kind of ties back to the start of our conversation. When you’re learning to be a producer, remixing other people’s music is the best way to learn, and then, after doing a bunch of remixes, trying to recreate other people’s music. Obviously, you shouldn’t release a copy of someone’s song, but for the exercise, for the practice, it was so good.

I’m so glad I did a bunch of remixes when I was little. You just learn so much. It’s almost like if you’re teaching a child to read or write and you give them a sentence like “I went to the beach” and you omit a word, and they can comprehend most of the sentence and they have to figure out what word is missing and spell that word. That’s what making a remix is when you’re learning, because you have a bunch of parts that already sound good and work well together, and your job as the remixing learner is to fill in the blanks.

Your first remix, if you’re a brand-new producer, might be just to take out the drums of a song and remake the same structure, but just remake the drums. If it’s a rock song, you might take out the drums and do dance drums underneath, and then, you’ve learned something from that. After you get comfortable with that, you might take out the vocal and write a new vocal over the top, or then you might remake the chords. Eventually, you might be like, “I’m going to challenge myself to remake every element of this song.”

I wasn’t thinking about this when I was working with Frost Children, but for learning when I was younger, that was so valuable. I love working with them. We’ve made a bit more music together. We’ve made original music together. They are so cool and talented. They just do everything. It’s awesome.

They remixed “Fuck My Computer.” They just texted me and asked for the stems. That happened organically because they had an idea for it. We decided we would do a remix swap because we had both had albums coming out really close together, and we have a lot of similar fans and thought it would be a good idea. I asked if I could remix the song “Sister.” At first, my instinct was to make something like their “Fuck My Computer” remix. I play it in every one of my shows because it lands so well. I wanted to return the favor and make something with a similar energy.

I didn’t imagine writing a verse on it. I imagined redoing the drums and making it a four-to-the-floor banger. But when I sat down to do it, I started thinking of melodies and just went with it. I didn’t know if they would be like, “Oh, bummer.” They really liked it. They said what I wrote inspired them to write more. And then we passed the stems back and forth until it became this thing. We didn’t sit down and be like, “We’re going to do a joint ‘Sister’ remix where we both sing.” It just happened naturally, which was lovely. I hope we can keep making more music together because I think we have a lot of the same taste and sensibilities, and I’m just such a fan.

If there’s anything more you want to say about creativity or something more you want to add to a question I previously asked, take a moment.

When I do shows and meet people after, a lot of people also make music, or they’re learning to make music, and they ask for tips. The one I’m always repeating is, you just have to do a bit every day. It’s like fitness. You just have to go to the gym every day. With fitness, it’s more valuable to do a little workout every day, or every couple of days, than to do one massive workout a month, because it’s training a muscle, and it’s almost like training your discipline as well as your actual technician skills on the DAW. You just have to show up every day, even if you don’t feel like it. 10 minutes a day is better than nothing.

The official Ninajirachi starter pack:

“iPod Touch” official music video

“Fuck My Computer” official music video

“Infohazard” official music video

Frost Children, Ninajirachi: “Sisters”

Full triple j live set

Name
Ninajirachi

Vocation
musician

Ninajirachi by Passive Kneeling