

On the importance of ritual



Musician Scout Gillett discusses hard work, staying present through sobriety, and connecting with one's roots.

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As told to Shy Watson, 2424 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Mental health](#), [Time management](#), [Day jobs](#).

Your debut album *No Roof, No Floor* is both haunting and joyful. What inspired you?

I had a newfound sense of freedom after a lot of trying periods. Being on unemployment through COVID finally gave me the chance to be an artist. I really gained a sense of hope. And I was reading a lot about the Madonna Whore Complex and the history of the veil and how veils were used with the Romans to ward off evil spirits. I just really honed in on what the record meant to me. I essentially found myself through a series of transitions. And so that's why all the hands are pointed up on the album cover. They symbolize reaching up through different phases, seeking a higher self, freedom.

When you say that you finally had a chance to be an artist during COVID and unemployment, do you mean that you finally had the funding necessary to be an artist? That you didn't have to work?

Yeah, definitely. It was the most money I've ever made, and I got to just play music every day and do what I wanted to do. The money also funded my record.

What was your process for writing these songs?

It varies, certainly, but a big rush of them were written through March to July of 2020. A few of them I'd written in 2019, and "Crooked" was one of the first songs I ever wrote—when I was 20—and that was in one sitting. So it varies. Some of them really came out of nowhere. I was trying to play music every day, and then there would be this huge rush and something would just pour out of me. For songs like "444," I had the chorus written for a year and a half before I finished the verses. And not even the chorus melody, just the chorus structure. And I was like, "This is something, this grooves." And I kept at it and kept at it. And when it was right, it came to me.

What fosters your creativity and what hinders it?

What fosters it is love and staying connected with my sense of self. I try to be really intentional about what I listen to and who I surround myself with.

Do you mean musically or who you listen to in conversation?

I guess both because it's who I surround myself with, what people. It matters what they say and how they behave, and music as well. I try to be really intentional about that, so that I always know what my influences are. I know what I like. And what hinders my creativity is my insecurities and fear. I think that's what hinders anyone in their craft—and those are demons that are always going to be there.

When you mentioned feeling connected to yourself, I thought of how you've toured so much within the past year. How do you make space to connect with yourself when you're so busy?

Well, being on the road is strange and a huge time warp because you're going somewhere every day, but there's a lot of time sitting around. I spend a lot of time just staring out the window and thinking, and I have rituals for the shows. After we do load-in and sound check, I always go on a walk by myself and try to digest the city however I can. And I always listen to my recording from the previous night's set the very next morning. I take notes while I listen, and that prompts me to journal even more. I think that's pretty much how I stay connected to myself. I really am bad about getting back to people. It's pretty much just me and my band and mostly me just staring out a window, thinking about everything. So I do feel like I find myself and change a lot when I'm on the road.

I know that you've done some solo tours and you've also toured with your band. What are some of the major differences between the two?

Sound check and load in are way easier when it's just me. I pull in, set up, do the guitar, do the mic, and that's it. There's no one else to worry about. And there's also a deeper sense of freedom in this way, because if I go off the rail or try something new, it's not going to mess anyone up. So that's really exciting. And I like that my vocals can really be upfront and highlighted during solo shows. With the band, you spend hundreds of hours with these people. I tour with a band of all boys, and that can be different... and a lot. And boys have cooties, so I don't know. It can also be a really fun being on stage with the band, feeling really tight together. It's an incredible feeling to play every night together and then really lock in.

What crowds do you prefer to play for and why?

I like playing to bigger, younger crowds because kids are the future, but I also have a deep appreciation for playing smaller towns because you can see and tell from their response how much it means to them that you came through. I think of cities like Fargo or Tallahassee where they're maybe not as well attended, but I still played a great show. And those are the fans that will stick around for a lifetime, because a band from New York or from a different city came through and played their town.

I know that you're also from a small town outside of Kansas City. Were there any bands that came through or any musicians who made a big impact on you in that way?

Certainly. I grew up in Independence, Missouri, outside of Kansas City, and I started going to live shows when I was 10. I was really obsessed with UnderOath, which is this scream-hardcore-adjacent-Christian band. My dad took me to see them with some of my church friends. And then one of my first best friends, Jude Cash, was the youngest of six and his siblings were all really involved in the music scene. They would have bands stay over at their house, Showbread and all of these hardcore Christian bands. And then when I was 15 or so, more of my friends started playing music in Kansas City. None particularly from Independence, but there are some bands in Kansas City that started to do cool things. And still it's been cool to watch their journey, like Dream Girl and Shy Boys and Kevin Morby, who's from Kansas City, but on the Kansas side.

It seems that no matter your tour schedule, you always make room for a stop in KC. What continues to call you back home?

I moved away from home six years ago, and during the first few years I felt really disconnected. One big reason being that my parents split up and my childhood home was sold. And I really feel like this record was in some ways a search for home and trying to find that for myself. Over the years, and I think since the pandemic, I spent more time going back to KC. I've found a deep appreciation and understanding about how my roots shaped me. And it's been really exciting to go back and notice how the people and the city helps define me and my music. I'm in that mindset right now and it's part of my writing process. And I love seeing my friends. They're so supportive and were so supportive of my move.

That's rare. A lot of times when someone decides to leave a smaller town for a big city, there's a lot of

resentment toward them.

There's a mixed bag. There's some haters for sure. Hater's gonna hate.

** I know that when you're in Kansas City, sometimes you'll bring in family members or long-term friends on stage. I know you played with your long-term ex, and your brother who's a magician, performed at your album release. Recently your dad came on stage to sing "No Roof, No Floor" with you. How did these collaboration with people from your past enrich your performances?**

It's empowering and it also shows a deeper history of myself and my inspirations. Having a magician brother growing up really inspired me, and it's a big part of me being an artist. And I grew up singing with my dad. He was supposed to do my album release, but I got scared because we had no time to rehearse. But we didn't rehearse before the show in Kansas City, and he nailed it. But of course he did! I learned what I do from him. I love inviting friends on stage, and I love having my family play a role in it. And my cousin too, we talked about doing a collaboration together where he'll do a score on the short I'm working on. It's important for me to lift up the people who were there with me from the beginning.

That's really sweet. What has being an artist taught you about yourself?

It's taught me everything I know about myself, because I work through a lot of my own personal turmoil and dreams and frustrations through song. And it's not even a coherent thing. Usually I get into a really meditative state and it comes through me, but it helps me puzzle together how I work and what I'm hoping for, what I'm lacking. I've also learned that I'm a really hard worker. I think in this business it's 99% hard work and 1% genuine talent. I still get imposter syndrome and down on myself, but I am a lot more confident than I used to be. I've realized that, above all else, I am an artist. And beyond even just music, I'm a visual artist, a director, etc. It's all helped with the overall vision.

You mentioned hard work. I know from being your friend that you don't have financial support outside of yourself. And I know that you're an absolute hustler. How do you manage to balance work with your creative side?

I started training at a very young age. I started cooking and doing my own laundry at six, five years old and chores, lots of chores. And then I worked with my grandpa for a while painting houses. And then I got my lifeguard job when I was 14. And then by the time I was 15, I bought my car. And then I got my license at 16, and then I got a second job. And then through high school I had two jobs and was involved in multiple extracurricular activities. Now looking back, I see that that was a form of escaping for me.

As I've gotten older, I realize I can be a bit of a workaholic and I need to identify that in myself when I'm trying to escape my reality. And because I love the feeling of hustling out and booking a tour and then being like, "Woo!" But I think my ability to balance has come more naturally with age. I don't party, which gives me a lot of time. My days are usually spent emailing, booking, planning, and then at night I'll have time for working on music. So I don't really see too many people. I try to keep my social life really close and intimate.

Let's talk about your not partying. How long have you been sober now?

Over a year and a half.

And how has that benefited your creative work? Your life in general?

It's benefitted my life one hundred percent. I feel a lot more clarity. I'm working better. I have to remind myself that I am making my most genuine work. I think for a while when I was starting to write songs, I would rely on drinking to loosen up and to get the emotions flowing, or whatever excuse I made for myself. And I realized it might not feel like I'm cracking open this thing and forcing it to come out and just word vomiting anymore. Now it's a slower process, something I have to work at. I'm not just ripping something open and forcing it to come out anymore. Because often I would drink a little bit and then just be like, "Oh, I wrote a song." But now it's

more of a process.

The gesture you're making is like a massage.

Right, right. Get to the sweet center without forcing it is how it feels. And I'd say with live performing, it was a bit of adjustment at first, and I was really anxious, especially after the shows when talking to people. But it means the world to me to be able to be present with the songs, be present with the crowd, and to not rely on drinking. I'm sleeping better. It's a nice life.

I'm proud of you. What's the most surprising thing you've realized along your creative path?

I don't know how much of a surprise this fully is, but maybe I thought things would be different once I got my foot in the door a bit. I'm surprised by the workload at this point in my career as I'm building a team. And I'm also surprised that people like my music. Strangers and random people. That's cool. That's a shock.

Of course they do. It's good.

Well, it's just surprising. Random people, that's been cool.

I know that you post a lot on Instagram and that you have a Patreon. How does self-promotion factor into your career as an artist?

It's a lot of it, and it does help because people see that I'm staying busy. I sell a lot of tickets through promoting shows on Instagram. Sometimes I wish we were living in the pre-digital age because it is a lot of work, and I hate being on social media constantly, but it gets the job done. People see that I'm busy, and when I run into people, they know I've been playing shows every day.

Scout Gillett Recommends:

Free Play by Stephen Nachmanovitch

The Year of Magical Thinking by Joan Didion

Alice Cooper's Easy Action

The Human Expression's Love at a Psychedelic Velocity

skinny dipping in the ocean

Name

Scout Gillett

Vocation

musician

□

Dan Dickerman