

On free exploration and expression



Musician Sen Morimoto on balancing vocal protest with community support, trusting your own values in the face of adversity, the importance of approaching creativity from multiple perspectives, and identifying success when creating without boundaries.

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As told to Lior Phillips, 2419 words.

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When you decided not to remove your criticism of Chicago mayor Lori Lightfoot from your recorded set for the Millennium Park at Home series this year, I was so engrossed by the way that the media and social media responded to your decision. You had this opportunity to get out there in front of people at a time when musicians don't have many opportunities to do so, and you made a strong choice as an artist to stand your ground. How did the reaction affect you?

I was mostly heart-warmed. The musical community of Chicago, the activist community, and friends and family were all really supportive. I was actually surprised that even people in my extended family, people who might have different political views than I do, reached out.

I felt like it was such a small statement of something pretty obvious going on, with the intensity of the reaction Lori was having to the protests going on here. The media reaction to the statement was much larger and honestly probably more damaging for the city government than it would have been to just allow me to make the statement.

But then it was also a little tricky afterwards, because all the venues are closed right now and not a lot of spots have the resources to pay artists. Once I had refused to remove my statement, suddenly a lot of musicians in the community were calling and telling me that they were also a bit bummed about working with DCASE (the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events) because of this situation. So I felt really, really bad for applying that pressure, although ultimately what I realized is that it wasn't me that was applying the pressure: It's that Lori Lightfoot's way of running things is that people are not allowed to speak up about that. I wasn't hoping that every musician would lose work or anything like that. In this particular instance, I felt that an organization that is part of the city government, that puts on a musical performance, really shouldn't have had the right to censor any kind of statement about some blatant wrongdoing or corruption in the city's government.

The conversation surrounding artists' responsibility to use their platforms for good has naturally been heightened by the injustices and general darkness of the moment. Do you see it as your duty to speak up because you have a following within the industry?

Totally. If I didn't have the space to say it, I would still be saying it to my friends. Originally this was going to be a concert at Millennium Park. So this shift that live music made, from being in person to being live streamed meant it was a kind of vague space to perform in. If I was playing the concert in person I would just

say these things on stage. There would be no conversation about censorship. They probably wouldn't just cut the mics on me. And I may have said something even harsher or more honest critique in person, because I wouldn't have been spending the time in solitude editing a statement that is meant to be permanent.

Most performances right now are streamed or video pre-recorded, so the promoter and the venue's ability to make changes to that is a scary space. I felt like it was wrong for DCASE to use the power that they have because of COVID-19. That sounds over-dramatic, but they wouldn't have the ability to censor me if it weren't for a pandemic happening right now.

I admire how you handled the conversation after another Chicago musician, Tasha, followed suit and pulled her set as well, insisting that you weren't condemning other artists that weren't doing the same thing because COVID has limited artists' ways to make a living. That speaks so much to the community you're a part of here. How important has that been in developing your voice as an artist?

I moved to Chicago when I was 21, and have grown into an adult who makes music for a living entirely here. My sense of responsibility and my loyalty is to Chicago, particularly the artists of Chicago. You can't fake it when you're a part of a community and truthful to it. There's no way to not mean what you say and continue on for a long time. And Chicago has a super politically active musical community. It's not to say that because I'm a part of that community that I have to come up with the most radical or exciting takes on current events. But it's good to think critically about your perspective in those directions. Be real with yourself about what you really mean and who is affected by what you're saying. That's the balance of saying something critically about the mayor and DCASE, but then wanting to clarify that musicians should be able to work and make a living in a time when it's really difficult to do so. I'm not just trying to be loud, hating on the mayor. It's a real concern for people protesting, and then at the same time coming forward with a statement that affects a lot of people that are doing hard work but also need to make a living. I never want to apply pressure in the wrong direction.

When was the moment you realized you were an artist?

I always wanted to do it, but I didn't totally believe it was possible until two years ago, when I put my last record out. It came out through a label, and it was the first time I wasn't doing everything super DIY.

I always thought that I would be making music when I could in my spare time while I worked other jobs. I always worked service industry jobs, washing dishes, serving, and stuff like that. The odds were against me, I guess—not even in such a bleak way, just realistic. Music is a hard thing to make enough money to live off of.

Creativity is difficult to put a monetary value on. It seems clear you value saying what you feel, not following trends or sticking in genre boxes, both in your music and not. Does that affect the way you approach creation—focusing on exploration and ideas that excited you rather than any business consideration?

Knowing that my music wasn't necessarily commercially successful was liberating. I hadn't had that pressure to make music that is digestible. I think my music is digestible, but off on a weird path.

Funny that we're talking about this now since I was just having a conversation with a friend about it. I've always learned each instrument for a specific task. When I was a teenager and I joined a punk band, I had to learn drums. And then when I joined a rock singer-songwriter project, I had to learn how to play piano. Then when making music playing all the instruments myself, every instrument that I add to it comes from a different musical background because of the life I've had in music. As I get older it becomes more intentional.

I think that everyone naturally has that tendency to prefer something that you hear over something that you've already heard—to seek out the thing that you are hearing that isn't in existence yet. So when I produce for people, I try to be really encouraging of that. If someone brings something that makes no sense to how I'm thinking about music in traditional structures, it's really exciting.

They heard something that most people don't hear because they're used to hearing it a certain way. That's my

favorite part of working with other people. Then when I work on my own, I give myself that same safe space and try to be less critical so that I can make weirder or more honest choices.

So when you create without any concrete boundaries, how do you then identify that sense of success within a song or within a moment? Knowing that it is boundaryless, and knowing that you could go anywhere at any time for however long, how do you then know, "Right. That's exactly where we need to be"? We try to define creativity essentially, but how do you personally as an artist identify that sense of progress?

That's a good point. I get lost a couple times in the process of making each song, and then there's some kind of rewinding and going down the other path that was skipped over. Similar to practicing music every day, you work that muscle every time that you create and allow yourself to go down different pathways. As you make those choices more and more and see the results of those choices, you definitely develop a stronger gut sense of what might be worth exploring and what might just be silly. But even then, you're never going to have that 20/20 foresight. You always still just have to try.

That balance must make working with others difficult at times. I love the way your new self-titled album plays with the ideas of reality and subjectivity, especially the line on "The Things I Thought About You Started to Rhyme" where you say "I believe in god the way my dog believes I'm dead until I come home from work." Does that sense of superstition or belief play into the creative process with your collaborators?

Yeah. Every time I work with somebody I'm surprised by some choice they made, but then taking those elements that surprise you and making them the centerpiece of that moment is really exciting to me. It's so crazy to live in a time where you can just email a song to somebody on the other side of the planet, and they'll email you back and the song is done. I can't believe that that's how music works now.

I started collaborating with people sort of on the internet, so I'm definitely cozy there. It's way more fun to be in person, but it does run the risk of you opening your mouth and making a change to something that they would have done another way. If you just let people do their thing and then email it to you, you have less control—and I think giving up a little control is good for any creative process.

What are the tools you need in order to make sure that gut understanding can kick in at full-force when you're making a new album?

Time and enthusiasm. The process of exploring and maybe never arriving is only bad if partway through you can't remember why it was important to do it in the first place. I don't really need much else. You can make a whole album with just your voice and find so many fun ways to explore that, as long as you have time and enthusiasm.

What happens on those days where you don't have that time and that enthusiasm? When you can't tap into that energy for any number of reasons? Do you push it until you get there or do you just leave it alone?

Whenever I have the self-awareness to stop when I'm mindlessly kind of digging at a brick wall, I'm always super grateful that I did. But I don't always remember to do that! Every once in a while, you push through and you get to the place where it's good again. That isn't ultimately a good thing, though, because then you think that you can do that any time.

There definitely have been times where I was working on something and it seemed like it was never going to come together or work out. And then I just forced myself to get through it, and it became something really good. I don't think that it was necessary, though. The importance of that moment was probably more dramatized in my mind than it actually was. I could have just stopped and come back to it later. That's probably a work/life balance thing that I'm coming to terms with. If you're going crazy working on something, it's not necessarily the passion or creativity, but rather the obsession. If it's killing you, then you should just go chill out and come back to it later.

Considering all of these different potential outcomes for your work must take a lot of mental energy. How do you manage to avoid burning out or pushing too much? How do you stop yourself?

I'm getting better at it. Life is balancing out a little more as I get older and there are more things in my life that make it easier to feel like I can tap out. For most of my life, I was pretty secluded with my music and spent the bulk of my time alone on it. I can still be a little less obsessed. It's good to have passion and that obsession when you're working, but as much as it's my natural tendency to use that, learning to balance out a little bit is probably not a bad thing.

What has been the most surprising thing you've realized along your creative path?

That the path keeps going. It just keeps going. The scale of a life of making things is so much more vast than I expected. Also, the things that you torture yourself over while you're making art are not as bad as you think. I was super critical of my work, especially when nobody in the world ever heard it. I'm hopefully going to be making things for a long life, and whatever the decision I made at one point in the process of making something was correct for that piece at that time. Going back and changing it wouldn't make it any better. It would just make it untrue to what was happening at the time.

Sen Morimoto Recommends:

Book - *Another Country* by James Baldwin

Song - "Snowman" by Martina Topley Bird

Investment - Bidet Attachment

Drink - Yorkshire Gold Tea, steep 4 minutes, add a splash of milk

Tip - Someday, when concerts are safe again, I recommend to all musicians that you put socks on your rider. It feels like a fresh start before your set and you won't have to buy socks anymore. Plus it's fun to see what kind they pick out for you.

Name

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Vocation

Musician, Producer, Label Co-owner

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Dennis Elliot