

On facilitating real connection



Musician Toro y Moi discusses the bittersweet necessity of narrowing his focus, adapting to the hours of parenting, and making a sound no one has ever heard.

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As told to Rona Akbari, 2577 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Collaboration](#), [Promotion](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Focus](#), [Success](#), [Family](#), [Money](#).

You've said that your latest album was more of a collaborative process. Is it hard to let go as an individual artist, when you're collaborating with other people? What is your relationship to the trusting others?

In the creative process, it's not hard. It's only hard to let go when turning in the final project. That's the only grieving I feel like I'm doing, at that point. Only once it's sent off to be commodified is when the grieving starts.

Why?

It's the sad truth that music is a product. You just have to mature with the piece and remind yourself that you're doing a job. And as much as you would love to put yourself and your spirit into it, it is at the end of the day a commercial product. Remembering that will help.

When you're working on an album, do you have a clear vision from the start or does it evolve as you go?

It definitely is just something that evolves. Even if there's a clear vision, it's going to evolve on its own, so I just have to ride that wave until I figure out what exactly it is. It could be a record. I want it to be a record. But it could just end up being one song, or an EP. There's definitely no telling where it's going.

Do you feel tension between the business side versus the artistic side when it comes to making music? I'm curious how running your own label factors into the process as well.

One thing I've learned throughout this career is, in order to strive for efficiency and sustainability, you need to also facilitate the industry somewhere. Somewhere along the factory line... either inspiring others by giving talks to students, or opening a creative studio, or a recording studio, or just being a producer or a mixing engineer and helping other artists' ideas get out and completed. That's what I've taken away from a lot of this: there's tons of jobs and roles within music other than rockstar.

A lot of people tend to forget that they can find happiness in different roles that aren't the main character. And I try to remind myself of the same thing. I've always tried with Toro to sort of show myself through my songwriting, but it's not necessarily about my story necessarily all the time. It's about the artist's story, and I try to connect with artists. That's the one thing that I've always been attracted to: just trying to talk to the artist, as opposed to talking to a listener or a new face. I strive to talk to people who I'm familiar with, or who are familiar with me. Just a conversation.

Do you think that you've always been making music for the artist, or is this something that you've evolved into?

In a way, I think I've always been for the artist. Just given where my taste lies and what my goals and motivations are. I feel like whenever an artist gains traction, in any field, there is this tendency to just focus on money, and it's really easy for that to happen. I have to remind myself that I got to where I am without money and it's more just about the ideas. People really care about the ideas and they could care less about how much money you have. So that's not the goal, I just try to remind myself. A good way of doing that, especially as a successful artist: you have to burn through your cash. And what I mean by that is, you just have to sort of live it. You hear whatever rappers or pop stars talking about whatever lavish lifestyle they're living in because they're actually living that. I don't have that kind of lifestyle. It's not really lavish in that sense. I'm not really striving to be part of that consumerist culture, so it's more that I'm down with secondhand clothes and I'm trying to just talk to that crowd and really think about the bigger picture here.

It's very interesting to me when artists dabble in different mediums or projects. You have the DJing and the design. Is there a discipline to how you work between them?

I made a deliberate decision around the pandemic lockdown to really focus. And it's nice that I have the privilege to do these different art forms, but there was a little bit of imposter syndrome, earlier on in my career, where I was like, "I don't consider myself a musician. I don't practice. I don't take lessons. I only play at the shows." That is the practice. The show is the practice. I made a deliberate choice to just focus on music. And I think a lot of people will get to that step. Everyone can arrive to that step through a different path. Eventually you have to focus and just pick something. And for me, that's music, and I think it's apparent that music is my direction or my route. But as far as offstage, how do I fulfill my time? Yeah, I like to paint.

Tell me more.

I went to school for graphic design and it's been a practice ever since 2016... I really feel like there was a moment where two things were pulling at me and it's music or art, and I did have to make a choice which one to prioritize. It is kind of bittersweet, but you just have to pick a direction and go with it. I think mainstream culture appreciates people that are experts in their field. When you're too much of a jack-of-all-trades, people can also lose focus of what you do.

Do you have a tic you have to fight against while writing or creating music?

At this point in my life, I'm a new dad and my time is not flexible, so I really don't have time to get distracted by rational decisions or just being ADHD about things. I just have to be disciplined about stuff. I have studio time and studio days, and I have a team outside of my music management team that's on salary as well, that's just keeping me on track. Basically I hire my own boss. I think that that's a thing a lot of people are a little intimidated by, because it stems from the 9 to 5 culture, and a lot of creatives might be turned off to that.

But one of the big revelations I had when I had a kid was that the 9 to 5 is for the kid. It's not for us. I could keep working before 9 and after 5. Adjusting to domestic life and knowing that you have these eight hours to really get what you have to get done... yeah, there are two hours of interviews and then there's one hour of recording and then one hour of painting, and then you go home and do whatever errands you got to do. At the end of the day, you can't really lose yourself in the art like that because you will end up getting sidetracked.

Sometimes the best work happens when you have limits or constraints. Do you feel that some of your best work is created that way?

Yeah. Growth really comes from constraint. You don't know you need to grow outside of something until the pot's too small and you're like, "I have to bust out. I need more space. I need more time." So yeah, it's good to feel those moments of constraint because it tells you, "Okay, it's time to expand."

How do you know when a project is done?

Luckily, I've had a lot of practice with that. At this point, it is my 15th year of doing music, which is kind of crazy. I remember the first record I turned in, and I was asking myself all the time if it was done or whatever. It was great, but in retrospect, when I listen to things or look back, I'm like, "I should have done this differently." Things like, "This is mixed weirdly." Those are the types of mistakes you don't notice in the moment, but that's how it has to happen. You have to be a little bullheaded about it, a little stubborn and delusional, so the vision just sort of happens.

I saw something yesterday. Someone posted a quote about, "Just make it exist. You can make it good later." I thought that was pretty cool. Stuff like that reminds you it's never really done. Even when you listen to music from the 70s that's been remastered, it's an example of music that's not done. They're still touching it to this day. They just bounced all The Beatles tunes to digital so that Apple could have it. The music is constantly evolving, so there's really never a finish line. Your song could end up getting sampled, and that could be what makes you the most money at the end of the day—when someone else uses your music.

Once you realize that it's never-ending and that there's this infinite life to music—maybe in ten years, another app makes your music go viral, and it's a song from 10 or 20 years ago—and you're like, "Huh. Now I have traction again." It's incredible. So early on, I just accepted that it's done for now, and you have to be happy with where that is.

It's the same thing for paintings. I look at paintings that have already sold and I'm like, "Damn. I should have really done this sort of process before I sold." Now I've found that process, and I know to do it from here on out.

What keeps you excited about making music after all these years?

I guess there's still lots of uncharted territory with music, and each musician has their own different levels they're trying to beat in the game. There's no correct path, but I do love those moments when you're making music with someone you really resonate with, or even when you're making music by yourself and think, "I know for sure no one's done this. This is crazy. No one's ever made this sound." Those moments are great. You get really high from them, especially when you're collaborating and discover those things together.

It's a very rewarding job. The things we make can really break down different cultural barriers, especially with music, because it's so bound to cultural experience—whether it's Black culture, gay culture, Americana, European folk. There is that DNA in it that keeps evolving, and it's fun to use that as a communication tool.

What practical tools or habits do you use during the ideation process—like note taking, mood boarding, or capturing ideas on the go?

I do all those things. I do everything from writing notes to voice memos. I definitely use the Notes app for random little thoughts that come through my head. Other than that, I really try to keep it simple. I think if anything, a lot of what motivates Toro as a project is trying to blend genres and different cultures. I feel like a lot of the stuff I'm attracted to is outsider stuff and trying to bring that to the mainstream. A lot of bohemia and hippie culture did turn into what the tech industry is now... It's a double-edged sword. I think about the passing along of information. I feel like that is probably the biggest agenda: how we pass information along generations and what's worth passing on. I find a lot of my work these days is more tied to that ancestral line and finding truth through that story—as opposed to culture and politics—and trying to find the essence of my human experience.

Even if you look at my Instagram, I used to post a lot of my art or even pictures of myself on the [@chaz.wick](#) Instagram. Now it's more nature finds and little textures that tend to inspire me. If anything, I feel like I'm telling people to look down at the ground as opposed to at their phone. It's more about trying to find the human element and that human essence through all of this technology. There are so many layers between our communication right now... Here we are still trying to get to the root of these motivations. So it's about trying not to get

distracted by these little technological advancements.

At the end of the day, for me, it's about face-to-face, real connection. Shaking hands and getting that face time in, because I feel like that's the most efficient and rewarding way to communicate. I think that's what I still love about touring, and the cool thing about music is that it puts us in front of people and forces us to gather, which is rare.

Toro y Moi recommends:

Traveling the country. I do think that enlightened a lot of what I thought I knew about living in America, or living in the suburbs, or a city. The world is actually less intimidating than it's portrayed to be. To me, it is not as awful as the internet portrays it.

Running. A lot of people think you have to prepare to run a marathon and it's totally not the case. And a lot of people think that you have to not stop running, which is not the case. You can just walk if you get tired. A lot of people, I think get intimidated, or a lot of people might be traumatized by exercise just from whatever PE class was or sports was for them as an adolescent. But actually being active and breaking a sweat, and running around, even if it's 10 minutes, is enough to sort of get grounded and re-centered.

Becoming an animal parent or a human parent is worth a try. I was a dog parent first and I think it really did prepare my wife and I for a lot of the little different challenges that present themselves with a natural baby. It just teaches you to be selfless. Dogs made me go outside every day. Rain or shine. I think that's really healthy.

Therapy is pretty cool.

Not letting financial decisions hinder your ability to continue doing something. What I mean by that, especially as a touring musician, is that early in my career, there were a lot of decisions made like whether we should crash on someone's floor or get a hotel. And now it's like, "Should we get a second bus?" It's like, "Huh. Wow. Things are really growing." If it's something that you're passionate about, I would say it's worth spending the money. If it's your job or if it's your lifestyle: get that apartment, get that bus, get that Sprinter van. It's totally worth it if you're thinking about it. And if you don't, you're just going to keep thinking about it and that's just going to bring you mental clutter. Because you trust yourself at the end of the day. You know that you want to be doing this. You know you want to be a designer. Who cares how much this program costs? Just fucking buy it. Suck it up later. Don't be afraid to invest in yourself.

Name

Toro y Moi

Vocation

musician

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Rich Lomibao