On following your passions



Photographer Michelle Grace Hunder discusses taking risks, forging your own path, and mentoring and teaching others.

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As told to Cat Woods, 2111 words.

Tags: Photography, Process, Beginnings, Inspiration, Identity.

Talk to me about Melbourne as a city to live and work in. Have you ever wanted to live anywhere else?

As a music photographer, I don't think there is a better city to live in in Australia. It's extremely vibrant, obviously there's so much culture, and events, and music, and stuff is always happening here. So for me, it's felt like the arts hub of Australia. And I'm sure maybe other cities might yell at me for saying that, but that's just what I believe. And I feel like I'm really fortunate to live in Melbourne.

I have played around with dreams of living in other cities. I actually have my O-1 American visa, so I go back and forth doing a little bit of work in America. But, I always appreciate when I get back here, and go, "Wow. We have our problems, absolutely, and there's stuff to work on, but I actually do feel really quite lucky to live in Australia at this particular time." So, I'm grateful to be an artist here and be able to do my work here right now.

Your passion for Australian hip hop got you immersed in that scene and led to *RISE* in an organic way. It's quite different from photographers who fly in and fly out of scenes for a job. What difference does it make to know the scene organically?

I didn't originally know the scene, but I knew a few people in it. And as I was exploring it organically, it was like, "Wow, this is so different than what a lot of people *think* Australian hip hop is. And I really want to document what that is, and what that looks like at this particular moment." I became very immersed in it for quite a few years, and had to learn a lot, and had to learn the history, and learn who paved the way in certain respects, and give people their flowers. I also had to understand different divides and rifts, and stuff like that.



Ruel on film

When you first started out, was there an established industry for music photographers in Australia, and did you face any pushback or resistance from venues, artists, or even media outlets?

There was no real establishment really. I didn't face any pushback, to be honest. I always felt very welcomed. I think that was because I took it so seriously and was like, "I want to do this professionally. This is not a hobby for me. This is what I wanted my whole life to be." And not only that, "I want the work to be of a level." That was super important. So because of that, I was always taken really seriously.

And I obviously had my issues, and as everyone does in this particular industry. But learning how to navigate that has been really important, because it's meant that I'm able to mentor and teach other people, since there is no body or official organization or anything. It's very just like a bunch of hobbyists that have come together. And then a couple of us have been able to navigate it to be professional.

And I really want that to change. I would love this to be a viable career option for way more people than it is. It's all about learning how to navigate the tough parts and be assertive, and stuff like that is what I like to teach, because standing your ground and knowing your rights and being able to communicate that effectively is something that I'm really passionate about teaching others.



Amy Shark for *Rolling Stone*

Did you have side hustles along the journey in order to make it?

No. I went professional within about six months. That’s not to say I was earning a lot of money at the start. I certainly was not, and I guess I was fortunate in that my husband, even though he’s a freelancer as well, he had a pretty stable career by then. And the first couple of years were really, really tough, because I was not earning

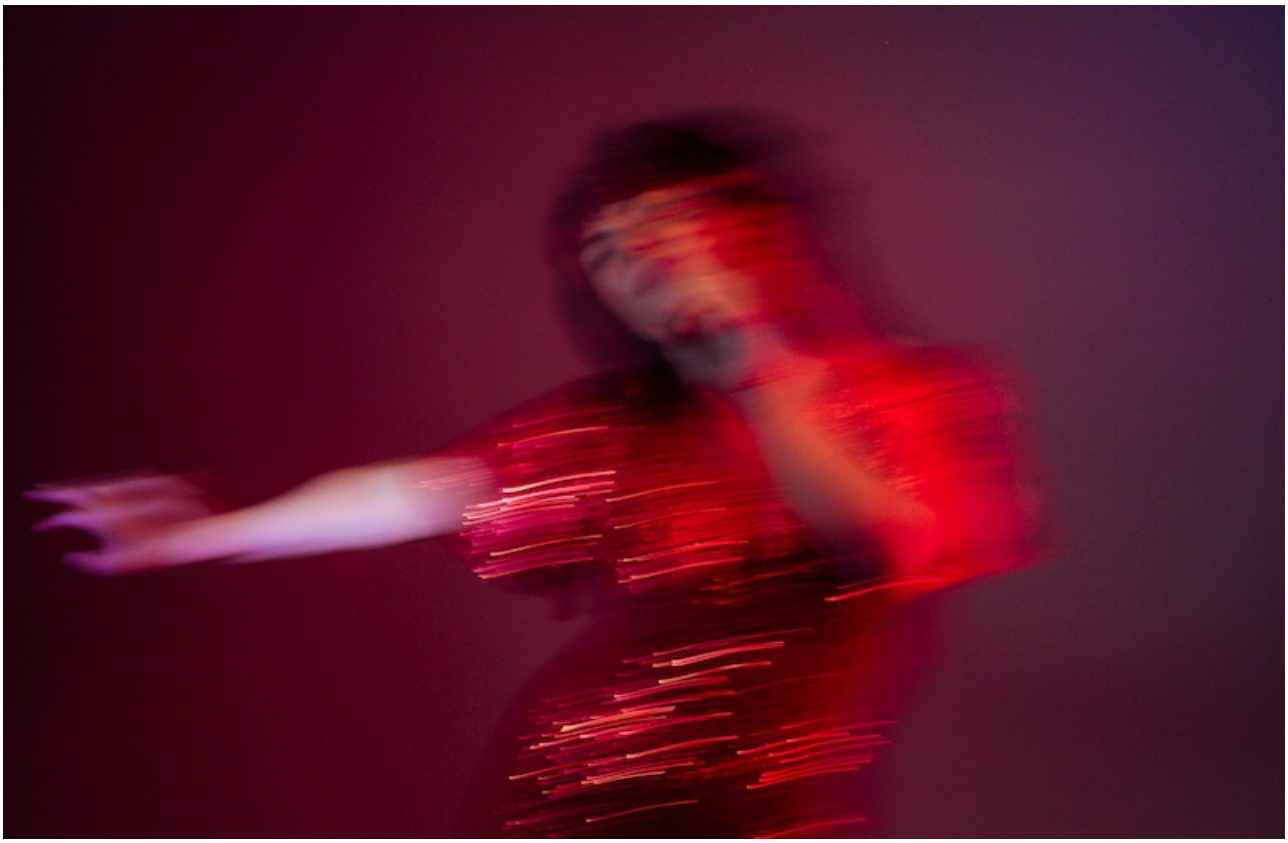
anywhere near a reasonable wage. But it did turn. I didn't really have a fallback, so I just threw everything into it.

People used to joke about my hustle game back in the day, because I was just everywhere. You would see me everywhere with a camera, and it was really in people's faces, and "What can I do for you? How can I help you?" And the only way to do it, really, is really immerse yourself in it. And I was very, very fortunate that it sort of just clicked very, very quickly.

Your photos are very flattering. You don't do closeups that pick out all the shadows off faces, et cetera, which I often see in newspapers. Is that a very deliberate choice that you want to bring out the most flattering aspect of people?

Yes, yes, yes. It has always been a very conscious choice ever since I was learning studio lighting. After I did my hip hop project [*RISE*], my second project was *Her Sound, Her Story*, which was just on women. And learning how to work with women of all ages, and colors, and sizes, and wanting to show them in their best light meant learning light, because I was still a very new photographer at that time. So I dedicated a lot of time to the craft at that point to really learn how to light women. And that's something that I'm really proud of and it's something that I get a lot of comments on, especially when I'm working with sort of slightly older women as well, because there is a way to light women in the most beautiful way. And so yeah, that is very conscious.

And like making people look like, truly, the best version of themselves, and looking at photos that they're proud of and that they want to share and they feel like they look great.



Ella Hooper - Press Shot

I would hate there to be a photograph that someone says, "Oh, my god, that's just a terrible photo of me." And we all see ourselves in different angles and stuff that we don't like. But trying to capture someone looking their

best, I think, yeah, that is an objective of mine. I know other photographers that are not like that, that are trying to get emotion or drama or it's different for them, I think. But I've always tried to shoot very flattering photos, for sure.

You've really sold me. I am a photophobe. I really struggle with it.

Actually, I would say the majority of people do. I don't work with models, mostly. Sometimes I do, but mostly it's musicians, and I would say 90% of shoots, someone walks through the door and they say, "I hate having my photo taken." And so I need to change that and make the experience something memorable and so next time they go, "Oh, actually I don't hate my photo being taken. I had a really great time," because it should be fun. I just want everyone to have such a great experience and be like, "Wow, I didn't know I could look like that. I feel great about myself. I feel like this is a great representation of myself."

When you made Her Sound, Her Story, what was your intention, and what are your plans for further documentaries in multimedia projects? I mean, would that experience with Her Sound, Her Story encourage you to want to do it again?

At the time, it encouraged me to never want to do it again because it was completely unfunded, so there was no money, and it was a four-year project, and it was with a director friend of mine, Claudia [Sangiorgi Dalimore], and we did everything ourselves. Every single thing that you usually have 20, 30, or 40 people doing on a documentary, it was just two of us. So it literally broke both of us, and it definitely made me not want to do much after that. But that has changed. And I think because I do a lot of work with my husband now who's an amazing filmmaker, we have many plans to do things down the track, so that's exciting.

The intention was to delve into why there is a gender disparity in music, because coming off my first project and looking at my folio, I was going, "Why is it so male-heavy?" I hadn't thought about it. And I get along with guys really well. I'm a bit of a tomboy myself. I've always been in male-dominated fields. So when I was doing *RISE*, I wasn't even thinking about it. I was like, "Oh, yeah, this is just who I'm working with." Then, I thought, "95% of these people are guys, and why is that?" Looking at the wider landscape, I saw that the whole music industry was very similar.

Originally it was going to just be a photo series, and then I realized we actually need to sit down with these women and talk to them about their experiences within the industry. And that's when I brought Claudia in.

We had no idea what we were doing. Originally, we didn't even know it was going to be a documentary. We thought maybe it would be maybe a little web series or something. And it just snowballed and snowballed and snowballed. And it ended up being a feature-length documentary, which nearly killed us, but we're both very proud of it. It's coming up to 10 years soon, and it had such a big impact. It actually had a really positive impact on both of our careers. So I think from that perspective, we definitely don't regret it. It just was, we went about it the hard way.



Noelani - Creative shoot

Do you feel like saying "no" is an option?

Saying “no” is always an option. I’ve only ever said no once to a particular artist that I felt like their music didn’t align with both my values and the values of my audience. And so I just was really honest and just communicated that to the label, and they were really understanding, and they said, “Totally get it.” And yeah, it’s funny because you see who they end up working with, and you’re like, “Oh, that’s interesting.”

Actually, one of the things I really like doing now is referring jobs to younger photographers, especially if the budget isn’t appropriate for me. I’m like, “Hey, that’s not really in the budget range that I work in, but I’ve got these amazing young photographers, and I’d love you to work with one of these people.” So I love doing that, I love giving other people opportunities. It’s hardly done at all, actually. So it’s something that I’m really trying to do is let’s give other people opportunities. I don’t need to shoot everything.

Michelle Grace Hunder Recommends:

Miss Kaninna, Australian musician, debut EP: Everyone needs to listen to this amazing, unapologetic debut EP that is a super impressive body of work from an artist who is going to be here for a long while! Get around it!!

Everyone that knows me knows that I’ve been listening to Kendrick Lamar’s album *GNX* flat out for months, so that’s a way too obvious choice (lol) but another recent album I loved was former group member of Black Hippy (with Kendrick) ScHoolboy Q’s album *Blue Lips!* Experimental and a bit unorthodox, I love it.

Tisa Tells’ YouTube: New media is where it is at for getting hot off the press information about everything going on in the world of entertainment. Tisa is one of my favorite YouTubers and is both informative and hilarious

Uncomfortable Conversations with Josh Szeps podcast: Josh is really good at getting great guests and tackling topics that are “uncomfortable,” as the title suggestions. I don’t always agree with opinions on this podcast but I always appreciate a different perspective.

I just watched the craziest, weirdest, and mind-bending Korean film (not for the faint hearted— warning) called *Old Boy*. Massive trigger warning to a lot of things, but if you like really messed up films this one is for you.

Name
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