On being okay with not knowing what’s next

Puppeteer and musician Tristan Allen discusses powering creativity through being competitive, setting goals, telling stories without words, and not always loving what you do.

April 9, 2026 -

As told to Max Freedman, 2262 words.

Tags: Music, Puppeteering, Beginnings, Focus, Inspiration, Success.

When I looked at the links you sent about the magic of puppetry, I was struck by the fact that puppetry has an intricate relationship with music. Can you talk about how the two are inextricable for you or to what extent you see them as separate things?

The first thing I’ll say about puppetry and the people I’ve met through it is, there doesn’t seem to be one way that people find it. No one really chooses to be a puppeteer. It just kind of happens to them. Generally, it happens to them because of a medium that they’re pursuing that leads to it.

For better or worse, the majority of people that fall into puppetry come from the theater world, whether it’s actors or set designers or things like that. They’ll find that, maybe, they want to play all the parts, or they want the set to be more forward-facing than the characters. There’s also animators, people who pay attention to the fact that when somebody gets up, they put their hand first and then they get up. They’re in tune with detail and motion. Dancers, too, especially dancers who can no longer do the split that they want to do.

I came into puppetry as a music person who wanted to be a pianist or composer. My idea of what puppetry could be was a way to perform my music. That’s not the case for everybody’s relationship between music and puppetry, but for me, puppetry was a means to put my music in front of people and tell a story without words dictated.

I’ve read that you got into puppetry through a Craigslist ad, but also that your father has some puppetry background. Can you tell me about your journey into puppetry?

When I was growing up, our basement had a briefcase of what I later found out were hand puppets that my dad made to apply for theater school in Montreal. He also would decorate our Christmas tree with a blue papier-mâché angel, which I later found out was one of the puppets used when he was participating in the early days of the Bread and Puppet Theater. It was never made clear that puppetry played any role in my dad’s life explicitly, but these things were around.

Also, I studied Gamelan, which is Balinese traditional music, and I got to go there. And there, I saw my first shadow puppetry, which is called *wayang kulit*, and that left a mark, especially because of how loud it was.

Then, I went to school for piano. I was a music person. The visual aspect of my work came about because I just didn’t want to be pushing buttons on stage to perform the music I inevitably ended up falling in love with. There was this question of, “I want to perform this music, but I don’t really know how in a way that feels more fantasy

than sci-fi.”

I kind of ran out of Boston and had just a few months to find work in New York. In that time, I saw an ad for auditions to be a marionette performer at one of the two marionette theaters in New York City, Puppetworks. The auditions were quite intense. There was this thing they had you do where they tied an egg to a string, and they told you to move the egg into the basket. This was one of the exercises that Mike Leach, the person who hired and trained me, put me through. He later told me that it had nothing to do with getting the egg in the basket, and it had everything to do with how you get it there, and that was what the test was for.

I think he didn’t want to work with a puppeteer, he wanted to train someone to be a puppeteer. Because I have this ability to pat my head and rub my stomach at the same time because I play piano, I think he saw that and saw that I was taking puppetry very seriously, in a way that a lot of people don’t relate with.

It took me a very long time to learn how to walk with a marionette. At this point, I was already doing two or three shows a day, five days a week, and I did that for roughly three years up until the pandemic. In that time, I had my answer: “I’m going to perform my music with puppetry.” That’s hopefully what I’ll end up doing for the rest of my life.

It’s interesting to hear you talk about taking puppetry seriously, because I believe you, but puppetry often has a sense of whimsy to it. I’d love to hear about the contrast of being committed to your craft and your craft being associated with humor and whimsy.

It’s funny to watch puppetry from behind the curtain, seeing two people curse at each other while desperately trying to hit the cue on a bridge—which is basically the top bunk of a bunk bed—elbowing each other, puppets flying everywhere. It’s absolute mayhem. When you watch it from the front, maybe as a kid seeing *The Magic Flute*, it’s these delicate little motions and characters being set in gravity.

In hand puppetry, you generally have your hands above your head. For a 40-minute show, to have your hands above your head, it’s just agony. It’s hard to get through that in a whimsical manner like, “This is fun. I’m going to make some people laugh and then continue.” It’s hard to get through something like that if you don’t take the craft of it and what it can do very seriously and passionately. Having your arms up for that long stops being “haha, these are dolls that I’m wiggling” really fast.

How do you feel about making wordless music with a story to it but knowing it’s possible that, without seeing the puppetry aspect of it, a listener might not understand it?

I think instrumental music has the power to allow for the listener to be the protagonist. If you’re curious and have imagination, it’s quite possible to, as the listener, put yourself in the setting that the music creates and to have your own journey through that.

I think, unfortunately, instrumental music gets relegated to accompaniment or background. Obviously, the word “ambient” being used a lot, or soundtracks being very dominant in instrumental music, takes away from people’s idea that they can actually be the one that guides and tells the story. Even with [my] puppetry—I run into this a lot in the puppet community—people [say] they see my narrative as poetic, so to speak. I think it’s a nice way of saying “I don’t know what happened.”

You’re not really going to know what happens when you see ballet, but there’s something genuinely powerful about that because you learn so much about yourself and the person next to you based on how you experience the same thing. Instrumental music isn’t a form that has a main character. It’s never going to grab your hand and pull you to where it wants you to go. And I think it can be very rewarding to see where you go.

What would you say motivates you across your creative output—the music, the puppetry, their intersection?

I wish I knew, just so I could focus on that motivation as much as possible so that I would work as much as I

can. Honestly, it's confusing when people say "I do what I love," because this stuff does not feel like I love it while I'm doing it a lot of the time, and that's OK. Obviously, there are moments, especially those moments where you lose time in the creative process, that are the thing I'm completely infatuated by, but I just have to do it.

I've felt that I've needed to do it, whether it's music or puppetry, since I was little. What that is and why, I have no idea. To tell you the truth, maybe it's good that I don't have an idea because I'm always propelled to find the answer.

Are there other moments besides getting lost in time when you're like, "OK, this is what I love"?

Honestly, I hate to admit it, but I like being on stage, and I like it when people clap and say, "Good job."

I think we stigmatize vanity as a society, to some extent fairly, but to another extent, it blocks people from being able to share themselves on stage and feel OK with putting themselves out there. If you're on stage and you're getting praised, you're making a connection with people. I don't think there's anything wrong with that, but I think that gets lumped in with vanity.

I see what you're saying. It can be pretty lonely. A lot of people warn you about how hard it is to make money, but they don't really tell you that you're just going to be in a room alone for most of the day. The counterbalance of being in a room with everybody all at once, I think, is necessary to have any forward momentum.

On the note of being alone in a room all day, I keep seeing everything behind you, and it looks like you're in your creative space. If that's right, how have you made this space work for you? What needs to be in a space for you to feel able to be creative there?

I know many people are the exact opposite, but I'm pretty organized and have my pencils straight. Everything's there when I need it to be there. I've got a desk for music and a desk for puppets, and I go between the two.

I've got trinkets. I like trinkets. I'm a little bit of a collector and a very competitive person. Where I'm working, I try to treat it as my gymnasium for the imagination and treat it like a muscle. It's like I'm trying to win at the Imagination Olympics. Every day, I tally the amount of hours I've spent doing creative work, and I keep them on these card-shaped wooden things, and they're all behind me looking at me. I try to beat my score every month or at least get a good one. And then, I see over the years that I'm getting better at creativity, which is what I want to be the best at.

One more thing about the room is I have the privilege now of sleeping in a different room than I work in. That wasn't always the case. It's really hard to love the piano, the bass, or your puppets when you're waking up and you see them staring down at you. You can almost hear their internal voice yelling at you like, "Why aren't you practicing?" Even though my separation is by just one wall, even that alone is huge.

To ask more about this competitiveness, am I understanding correctly that this competitiveness is mostly with yourself?

Honestly, I'm just competitive. I've been getting into a little bit of ping-pong, and I adore it. I grew up competing as a *Magic: The Gathering* player. I was always too small to be good at sports, but I wanted so bad to find a way to break them that would give me favor.

I wouldn't say [my competitiveness is] just with myself or against others. I'm just somebody who has this need, even if it's maybe not in my health's best interest, to do the most and the best I can.

I'd love to hear about what success means to you, and that doesn't necessarily have to be just within your creativity.

What success means to me is changing depending on where I am. I've always had these very simple but concrete

goalposts. One that I have currently is for a stranger to invite me to a place far away that I've never been, someone who has enough incentive to see me perform and is able to pay for a night at a hotel. And then, I would take a bath in that hotel after the show, and under the water, I would scream, "I did it," and then I would come up with my next goal.

Is there anything more you want to say about creativity, or anything more in response to a question I asked that, when I first asked it, you didn't quite feel you were able to articulate?

I think I struggled with discipline and creative working, getting in the chair, for a very long time, and it made me quite miserable. In that time, I was treating creativity very romantically, waiting for a lightning-bolt moment or, like in the movies, things to just explode out of me. For me, that doesn't exist. It kind of bums me out, but I really do believe that, if you're going to be doing this stuff, you've got to do it every day. Really beautiful things will happen, but don't expect to want to be doing it all the time or feel inspired to do it all the time.

Tristan Allen Recommends:

Philippe Genty - object & bunraku inspired puppetry

Ilka Schonbein - hand puppetry

Ines Pasic - body puppetry

Richard Teschner - rod puppetry

Bruce Schwartz - rod puppetry

Name
Tristan Allen

Vocation
musician, puppeteer

Tristan Allen by Virginia G Ruiz