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On tuning out everyone's voice but your own

Singer and filmmaker Kate Hollowell discusses self-doubt and overconfidence, rejecting the concept of failing and bombing, and maintaining full creative control.

I don't usually like doing interviews. I did one and made it a complete joke and they never published it because I kept talking about how I had a single coming out with John Mayer.

I had a feeling you were going to approach this conversation in a jokey way, so I'm ready for that. You're an artist who puts it all out there—straight from your head to your art. What would you say to those who want to do the same but feel like they can't? Because of the pressures of "Influence" and "Platform" or whatever.

If you want to release stuff, a good place to start is to reject the idea of bombing and failing. So even if you are failing and bombing, if you reject the concept, you are thus not bombing.

If I'm doing a bit in my show, the show is part comedy, if people don't get it or I feel like they won't, it only makes me go harder. It's rejecting the idea of what other people think and literally doing it for yourself. My project in general and me as a person is rejecting the idea of being cool.

That's funny because maybe you don't feel this way, but your audience, I think, because I'm one of them, thinks you are cool or that you "seem" cool. You "look" cool. Whatever that means.

I don't want anyone to ever know what's real and what's not real. Because to be honest, I don't even know what's real and what's not real.

The project exists for me, too. I have to keep it exciting for myself. And maybe people perceive that as being cool or strategic, but it's more that I have to keep changing and shifting and building on it to keep it exciting. At one point I had only done 10 shows [as Number One Popstar] and I was already bored of my set. I had to change it up.

Number one Popstar is an egomaniac. It's an exaggerated version of myself. If that exists within me, then it is part of me. It rides the line and I step in and out of it. The live show is a big part of it. There's a whole persona I'm creating that is not far off from who I actually am.

I saw a clip where you come on stage wearing an elderly man's mask. I get that it's not you walking on stage, calling yourself No. 1, thinking and acting like you are the most talented musician ever. I love the contrast with the following music act.

Yes. I've been told that people find it hard to watch the band after me because they're taking it seriously. [laughs] I'm basically parodying what they're doing. I think it's a cool pairing because they're actually really good at music and they're actually really sick live. What I like about Number One Popstar is I almost don't want it to ever be that big... I mean, sure I want to be number one. Technically I am, but what I like about it is that when I enter a room for a show, everyone thinks they're going to see a music act. So I always enter with the upper hand because I'm going to show them that they're not going to see a music act.

I never go to music shows. So I look at it from the perspective of myself: What would I want to see that would really make it fun?

Sometimes there's no performance in live performance.

I'm always like, "Man, that person has an amazing voice live. Man, that person is so good at the guitar live." But you can listen to music on your computer or in your car. Why are you going to see it live? What's the benefit? For me, I want an experience and I want to see the truest realized version of someone. Or not even the truest but like the most... I don't know, I want to see a show! Music is the lowest priority for me, and I think that should be the headline.

But your songs have broken into the mainstream, which turns the project on its head. You even had Number

One Popstar shirts in target! Do you want fame or not?

Yes. I want to sign a million dollar record deal and then blow it all to shit. And shave my head. I would 100% take the fame. It's just hard. I would take the fame as long as I could still do whatever I wanted to do.

Even though music isn't the priority, it's not like you're putting out bad music as a joke. Your pop songs are good pop songs. Are you signed?

No. There are a lot of artists that pretend that they're cool who make fun of their label. I've been approached by labels, but nothing to me seems to make sense, because I just don't want some random guy that doesn't even like his job that works at a label to tell me what to do or if he likes my music video concept. I never want to get lost in this thing that happens with musicians.

I have so many friends that are actual musicians that are signed to big labels, and they're constantly posting stuff on Tik Tok, like three times a day because their label forced them to. It's the most boring, weirdest shit. I never want to feel submissive to anyone else.

Number One Popstar is parodying being a pop star musician. But it's also maybe the truest form of being a musician, because you're just like, "I don't give a fuck." Number One Popstar is also me exploring the most eccentric parts of myself. And working through trauma. Number One Popstar is me working through trauma.

Maintaining creative control seems to be your "number one" priority.

I try to stay in control of everything, directing, producing because that's the way it'll be the best representation of myself. When I do shows I do them by myself. I just need someone to queue the tracks. I don't have any other musicians up there with me. For the Dehd tour [I did], I thought about bringing a drummer or another person but I think it's funnier and way more vulnerable to be up there by yourself. Ultimately, it's not about sounding perfect live. If you want to hear the perfect version of the song, go listen to it on Spotify. Or Limewire.

Being up there by myself, I don't have a shield. There's no out. There's no other person to riff off of. It's just me. And if I fuck up, it's all the better.

I can't tell...Do you think the music is "eh?"

No, I love the music. I don't like most pop music, but I like my music. That could also be the headline of the interview.

Do you listen to music?

Not really, no. I mean, sure, I listen to some music, but I listen to music from 15 years ago. Aside from a few acts that stand out to me, like a Caroline Polachek, I don't know a lot about music that's going on. I don't know, I'm delusional. I'm like, "Yeah, I think all my songs could be on the radio."

And they have been.

It is funny, my song ["I Hate Running"] is on one of Spotify's biggest workout playlists. Do they know it's a joke?

Bo Burnham's music is fun, that special [The Inside Outtakes] was really funny. But I don't think you're listening to that music when you're in the car because it's really comedy leaning. With Number One Popstar, if you're not paying attention, it can just be a really fun pop song. Then you're like, "Wait, did she just say 'We're all going to die' multiple times in a song?" And somehow that's in H&M? It was in H&M's around the world.

I like the friction and the tension. And I like to live in that world. If today it's going to lean more toward music or today it's going to be me barely singing at a show and mostly focusing on bringing old men up on stage and taking their shirts off, it's going to be whatever suits me at the moment. When I just focus on the project bringing me joy, I think other people can find it joyful, too.

But I'm pretty mediocre at everything. I think that should be the headline, 'I'm pretty mediocre at everything.'

Do you actually believe that?

It depends on the day. If you don't have lulls, you'll never be a good artist. You have to have an absurd amount of self doubt. You have to have days where you hate yourself and days where you think you're the best thing in the world so that it can balance out. That's what keeps me self-aware, maybe. I don't know if I should do this interview in the egomaniac voice of Number One Popstar, but I'm riding the line.

Tell me more about riding that line with music and comedy and Number One Popstar, this thing you reference that is both not you, and also completely you.

The biggest thing about Number One Popstar is that I'm rejecting having to be something. By saying I'm the

Number One Popstar, you've already formed some idea. Some people are absolutely annoyed by that name. Or they're like, "Wait, that's weird. What is that? Interesting." A lot of people are confused and say, "Is it comedy or is it music?" It's both. I don't like this weird thing where everyone has to put you in one thing like, "is it Bo Burhnam or is it Caroline Rose?" It's both.

I'm developing a comedy show that I just did at the Elysian Theater in LA which is different from Number One Popstar, but I'm still doing music. It's more comedy leaning, just me on stage. Explaining the project is really dumb because you either get it or you don't. What I'm trying to do is create a world where there's tension, and people feel uncomfortable. That in turn makes me laugh.

Sometimes it's hard for people to grasp that things can be more than one thing at the same time. Things can just be fluid.

That's a perfect way to say it. It's funny—with the comedy show, a lot of people were seeing me for the first time and they were like, "It was so funny. And the music's actually really good!" And then if I play at a music show, people are like, "Those songs are so catchy, and you're really funny!" It's about the person's expectation walking in. If they walk into a show and there's another musician performing, they're caught off guard by the comedy. But if I go into a comedy show, and I play really catchy pop songs, they are so caught off by that. It's like if you make comedy music it has to sound like Weird Al.

Your shows are very interactive, how have your audiences responded to elements of surprise, like impromptu conga lines?

It varies with every show. There's some shows that I've done, like one in Seattle to 1,000 people, you would have thought I was Lady Gaga. Everyone went crazy for it and immediately got it. But then I went to San Francisco and you could just tell people hated it. Hated it. I enjoy that. Being able to make people have any extreme reaction excites me. Even if it's disgust.

I can imagine if your friend is like, "Hey, want to go see this music show at Zebulon," and then you go and this girl's coming out in an elderly mask or handing out trash for people to throw at you, they're kind of like that's not what I signed up for.

I think it should shock and confuse people. When I'm bombing, and A, I reject bombing, I think "You guys are the ones that are bombing because you're not getting it." And then I go harder. I've seen people perform, and when it's not going well they allow that to let them crumble. When things are not going well for me, I'm like, "It's only going up from here."

I like the challenge of having to win an audience over, but I will say it's exhausting sometimes. It is a fun thing to win people over but ultimately, just making the show fun for myself is the basis of everything.

In poking fun at music culture, it seems you are positioned outside, ironically, of what's popular. Does that feel isolating?

I just bought two acres in the mountains of LA because I like being in my own world that I create.

I think the idea of being a musician in the present day is really weird. The idea of having a label, who is like a parent that gives you money and tells you what you can and can't do and takes some of your money...and the idea of a manager...I think everything's weird. I think the idea of a job is weird. I think the idea of performing—going and watching someone and they get to be up on a stage that's higher than you—is super weird. That is why when I perform, 80% of the time I'm not on the stage.

And you're pulling your audience up on stage, flipping it completely.

The point of my performance art is to reflect back to people the insanity of things and deliver it in a weird strange way.

The way you play with the corporate side of culture is hilarious, like telling everyone you are sponsored by Ross Dress for Less.

My comedy shows are heavily sponsored, but they're all fake sponsors. I like the idea of corporatized things and having to bend your morals to get money and being at the whim of these weird companies that control so much. In my comedy show, I have a script and DP there. We do a live taping, we shoot on stage with people in the audience that I pick for a Ross Dress for Less commercial. I have someone live edit in the back and then we screen it. It's like a really psychotic, not okay, Ross Dress For Less commercial that no one knows they're acting in.

I don't fault anybody for being like, "I have to put a Beats by Dre shot in my music video because they're giving us \$50,000." Well, yeah, obviously do it. It is a weird and funny thing to troll and play with. Honestly, I've gotten hit up by Bumble. I've been paid to do posts. I'm not against it. But I like the idea of doing it with these horrible embarrassing places. There's nothing cool about Ross Dress for Less. If Ross Dress For Less wants to give me \$20,000 for a show, let's do it. That's the ultimate goal, making fun of Ross Dress For Less but also getting paid.

Stealing from the man except the man isn't cool. Not like getting sponsored by Fender.

Yeah, Fender is problematic, too. I'll never get sponsored by a guitar company because I'm just not that good at the guitar. You could put that as the headline, too.

Kate Hollowell Recommends:

Number one popstar show

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Number one popstar show

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Kate Hollowell

Vocation

singer, comedian, filmmaker

Fact

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