

On trusting your instincts



Singer-songwriter Ethel Cain discusses the death of alter-ego, how to know when a project is finished, and ignoring the opinions of others.

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As told to Michelle Lyn King, 2305 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Focus](#), [Inspiration](#), [Success](#).

What's been the most surprising part of being on tour?

How quickly we've all acclimated. It was kind of looming in the distance for the months before, and I was really nervous about how long [the tour] was going to be. I've never performed this many shows in my life, much less back-to-back, but pretty quickly, we just got the swing of things down. Now it's just another day, another show. We roll right through it. That's been surprising to me.

You've spoken in other interviews about how Ethel Cain—the project, the persona, the alter-ego—is dead. What's been your experience of performing Ethel Cain every night and continue to engage with this project that in some ways you might feel done with?

I feel like there is a level of detachment that you can't avoid whenever you're doing something that is so old for you, honestly. I was just having a conversation with my friend the other day about how, for [listeners], a so-called "album era" is from the beginning of the rollout up until it's done being performed. But for the artist, the era is from the beginning of the conception of the project up until its release date. For me, this album was kind of already over and for everyone else it's just beginning. It's been interesting—that dichotomy between myself and the people who are coming to see the shows, but you just find that head space and you sing the songs and you allow yourself to get into that space for the hour, hour and a half of the shows. I'm not there anymore creatively. Mentally, I've already moved on to the next project, but for the shows it's still nice to be able to go and sing those songs with the people who come to listen and you find enough of a space to inhabit for the show.

For me, I was not Ethel Cain making this record. [I was] just the artist creating a character, but to everyone watching you are one and the same. Suddenly you have this character that you have a very separate relationship from and now you're inhabiting the same image and body for a moment. It's interesting because you're the most detached from the project, but you're also the most whole and one with it at the same time. It's very interesting putting on that costume, so to speak. It's interesting seeing how the character translates when you're no longer in your studio and you're in a room with 500 people who are all calling you the name of this character that you've written.

Have you found that there are people who don't even know that Ethel Cain is a persona or a character? People who know that Ethel Cain exists, but have no idea that Hayden exists?

I think everybody's been on the same page. Everyone that I've talked to at the shows has been like, "Do you go by Ethel or Hayden?" I just tell them that I go by Hayden. It's easier to play [the] character [of Ethel] in photo shoots and whatnot, but in the room, I feel more like, "Here's me, the artist singing these songs that I wrote." I think people understand the difference.

It can be really difficult for any artist to know when something is done. You can stay in that tinkering phase forever. How did you know [Preacher's Daughter] was done and how did you know that it was time for Ethel Cain to die? I suppose those might actually be two entirely different questions.

Yeah, those questions honestly have opposite answers. The second song that I wrote for the record was "Strangers," which is the [last song on the album]. That's her being dead, me wrapping everything up. I knew that's where the story was going to end. I always knew that I was telling the story backwards and I was starting at the ending and it was just going to work its way back up to the beginning. So, story wise, I always knew that's how it was going to end, but I never knew when the music was done. I worked on the record for four years and I was crying, delivering the stems. Because I was like, "This record is so far from being finished," because you're right. I could tinker with it forever. I could sit and tweak. I'll always be better at producing and writing tomorrow. There will always be something new that I could do. But I think it just gets to a point where you just gotta put it to bed. I was having conversations with [my manager] and with my friends and I was like, "I don't know what's going on anymore." And they were like, "You just have to put it to rest. You have to just close the book and be done with it at some point." As the deadline got closer, I was like, "Okay, it's time to finally be done with this." As an artist, you're never done. There never is an end, but I think sometimes you just have to know when to call quits and be like, "Okay, if I work on this any longer, I'm going to run it into the ground." You have to trust your instinct and say, "Let's wash our hands of this and move on."

How do you define success?

Ever since I was a kid, success is just the freedom to create whatever you want with the resources to make it happen. That's been the core belief that's molded my relationship with success. It's a double-edged sword because, on one hand, you can say you don't want to be famous or whatever, but it's interesting trying to dissect success from fame because any amount of success, at least in the artistic world, will come with some amount of fame. When I first started making art, I always was just like, "I wish I had a bajillion dollars to make whatever I wanted." Just a ton of money solely to use to make films and make music and indulge every little web in the creative process. As an artist starting out, not having any resources and having a very limited range of tools and toys to play with while making art was very frustrating. I was like, "I would love to have millions of dollars to throw at a project and have money be no object when it comes to art." So that to me is what success was, but as I've moved further into this career, you start to learn that in order to get that level of money and the resources and power to create, you have to play the other side of the coin, which is the business front, which I guess some people would consider pandering or selling out or whatever you want to call it. But you have to play that side of it in order to have that creative freedom. You have to have weight to throw around. I don't think you can ever have your cake and eat it too in this industry or in life in general. I just made sure that through everything, the core driving factor of everything that I do is onwards and upwards to making bigger and better projects and make quality pieces of art. That's always been the driving force behind this project.

Right now you're on tour. You're doing interviews like this one all the time. How do you avoid burnout and protect your creativity during this period where you have to focus more on self-promotion and business?

I think I just compartmentalize stuff. I always wanted to be as open as possible, but you realize that at some point, some things get a little bit too big for you to take all of it head on. I've been breaking everything off into little pieces. I go to the venue, I do the show, I think about the show and only the show. I go home. I don't think about anything. I wake up. I take a walk in the park. I think about deep breathing, clearing my head, enjoying what's around me. It's very much about learning how to be in the moment and only the moment. There's no way I can be creative right now. I've been sectioning everything off and doing little bit by little bit, and trying to focus on what's right in front of me and nothing else. I've closed the door to the creative process right now, and I've accepted that after tour is over, I can go home, I can settle. I can take a deep breath and then I can open up that door again and move into the next project. It's about focusing on the task at hand and not letting yourself get overwhelmed with everything you have to do all at once. Focus on the one thing you're doing right now and the rest will happen later.

When you are able to open that door to the creative process again, can you speak to what your creative process looks like?

For me, the creative process is very much about self-indulgence. It's about consuming certain types of media that I love and going places and having my little adventures. It's about giving in. With this side of the process, it's more about the tour, the press, the rollout. You have to be very quick on your feet and tactical. I like to do the exact opposite when I'm working on a project and just go with the wind, go with the water. Watch whatever I want to watch, go wherever I want to go. Have zero rules. Sometimes I'll get up and I'll drive to another state for no reason by myself. I'll have breakfast by myself. I go shopping at an antique mall or go to the movies or go for a walk and a park I've never been to and read a book, watch a new movie, scour the internet. Some niche, little rabbit hole of something that I'm interested in and research some old historical event on Wikipedia. I don't even know. Whatever I want to do, I let myself do it. No rules, no regulations. I love to get caught up in something and get whisked away by it. It's never even really a conscious thing. With *Preacher's Daughter*, I was doing a lot of things all at once and the story started to unfold itself. I stuff a bunch of stuff in my brain and then the rest happens naturally, I guess. It's not really a conscious thing.

What's your relationship like with self-doubt?

Self doubt only comes when I start taking in criticism and when I take in the opinions of others. I usually don't have a problem with feeling self-critical, self-doubt, imposter syndrome—all that stuff. It really only comes when I go reading comments or whatnot, so I shy away from that. It's hard. Everybody wants to know the feedback that they get on their artwork. Everybody wants to know what people are saying, but sometimes you just have to shut that door.

I have such a good time making art. I never don't enjoy the creative process until right there at the end when I start worrying about what other people might think. As long as I can steer clear of the worry that someone else won't like it and focus on whether or not I like it, that's all that matters. That's the only dividing line between me absolutely having a blast, creating something and being completely stressed, thinking that other people may and not like it. I just try to keep to myself and remember that at the end of the day, it's for me and nobody else.

When you are opening yourself up to feedback from people you trust, how do you know what to take in and what to ignore?

You need a strong sense of your own craft and what you like about it. You need to at least try really hard to know what it is you're doing and what you're going for with a project. If you can do that, you only have to take the criticism you agree with. When I was listening to criticism for my record and people were criticizing the production, the mixing, I was like, "Well, I agree. I'm still new at production. This could be cleaner." I agreed with that and I took that criticism in. But then the criticism that the album was too long or there was too much free verse, or this or that. I was like, "Those are the things that I love the most about my music. Those are my core inspirations and influences and that's my sound. That's the aspects of my music that I enjoy the most." If you know the parts of your art that you love, if someone else doesn't love it too, you just don't even have to register it. It doesn't matter. If there's criticism you get that you agree with, then you probably already knew that to be a fact and were already taking it into consideration because you thought it before they said it. As long as you can keep a good grip on what you love about your art and what you want to fix, then you'll pretty much know how to filter out the criticism and know what is worth your time and effort and what's just somebody else's opinion.

Five Recommended Ethel Cain Songs:

"American Teenager"

"A House in Nebraska"

"Gibson Girl"

"Crush"

"Throughfare"

Name

Ethel Cain

Vocation

singer-songwriter

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