

On leading with love



An interview with musician Meg Remy

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As told to Max Mertens, 1294 words.

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

U.S. Girls has always been a collaboratively-minded project, especially with this new album. How do you organize all these musicians and ideas while making sure things get done on time?

I have a lot of to-do lists. I'm a big fan of keeping notes and journals and schedules, and actual physical ones that I cross off things when I'm done. I'm not much of a fan of the digital kind of note-taking or calendars. It's really just a lot of paperwork and trying to only work with people who are accessible. And just staying on top of my shit. The record that we made you couldn't really do unless you were a really detail-oriented person, which I am. I enjoy that kind of work, I enjoy being busy even with mundane things. I'm just a great person for the job.

I worked on my own for so long, and kind of reached the point where I felt like I had done what I wanted to do on my own. So here and there I started incorporating more people either to write with or record with, and it's just snowballed over the years into lots of people now. It comes from a general movement, which I think any engaged artist is involved in, which is trying to keep yourself interested and evolving.

How did you find this community of like-minded artists?

There's no set way, it just came from random things. I met [Basia Bulat](#) because I was working at a cafe and she was a customer, she and I became friends outside of music, and then realized we both made music and wanted somebody to collaborate with. Other people are players that I've seen at shows or played with their bands, and you make a mental note of them. [Max Turnbull](#) is my husband so that's in my house. If you're keeping your eyes open, and you are interested in celebrating other people and seeing what they have to offer, there's a lot of people at your disposal.

With you and Max, do you find you both share a similar approach when it comes to making music?

We're completely different. I don't really play instruments the way that Max does. Max also has a voracious appetite for music both new and old, so he's always digging for music, and finding new things. I'm more set in the things that I like and mining from the things that I've been mining from for a while. We work very differently, not just creatively, and I think that's why our relationship works because together we make one whole human.

I read that you don't have internet at your home, how has that impacted your productivity?

We're massively more productive. Not just in music and art, but we read a lot of books, talk a lot, and have time for enjoying our food. I don't know how much time the average Westerner spends on the internet-whatever those hours are, that's free time for us, we're filling it with other active things.

Are you someone who revisits their old songs for inspiration or to determine what you want to do differently?

I revisit old songs only to re-record them. We did that on this album. "Incidental Boogie" is an old song that I had released previously, and we revamped it. I've done that with other records as well, because if you write a decent song, it could be done in more than one way. That's the only reason to visit old stuff.

How do you avoid creative or physical burnout? Do you have any self-care tips that you've learned over the years?

It's easy to get burned out on tour because of the scheduling and the travel and all that. I don't smoke, I don't drink, I try to eat healthy, I warm up religiously before performing, so those things help with the physical aspect of the job. In terms of creativity, I've never felt creatively burnt out. I don't think that will happen to me, because I'm an observer and I'm constantly reading and taking new things in. I feel like you only get burnt out of something that you don't want to do.

I don't really separate music from the rest of the practices I participate in. Writing or collage-making or filmmaking... it's all my artistic practice, so I'm always creating something even if it's not something that anyone else can see or hold in their hands. My main reason for doing all this first and foremost is for my own survival and humanity.

What did you do before you did music?

I've always done music since being a teenager. Before U.S. Girls, I was in bands that toured and things like that, it's been music for a long time. Before I was heavy into making music, I made zines.

How would you define success, and how would you define failure in your creative career?

I don't think there's any failure. For me, failure is just when the cognitive areas in my brain get the best of me and affect my life and the decisions that I make, but otherwise there's no failure. Success is continuing to have ideas and work on things. If I was talking about monetary success, I would feel maybe I was being successful if I was making a living wage being an artist, which I am. In that way, I guess that's success. Success and failure to me are terms that kind of come from capitalism and I don't really agree with them.

If you could give younger artists any advice, what would it be?

Keep your head down and work, and don't be looking over your fence at your neighbors' yard. Just make things, and don't worry about where they're going to lead or some sort of equation that you think you're supposed to fill to have a successful career.

You've always been a political songwriter. What's the secret to addressing political issues or topics in music without it coming across as cliché or trite?

No idea. No idea. I have no answer to that question, it's really hard to talk on those topics while also having a career. I'm feeling my way in the dark trying to figure it out. I have no choice in the matter—I have to talk about these things. It's what I want to talk about. It's what I think about. It's what I read about. It's the connections that I see. The best is when it's coming from good intentions. I think if you have good intentions, and you can stand behind them and you're leading with love, then most likely you're doing something okay.

Meg Remy recommends:

I just read a book called [Blue Highways](#) that affected me a lot and in turn, got me into Walt Whitman, who I had never read.

I've been listening a lot of [Ben E. King](#), who's a singer, he sang with the Drifters and he also sang solo. I listen to him every day and it's really inspiring to me the way these songs were recorded, and also his voice and the emotion he conveys, and the stories he's able to tell through just his use of his voice.

The movie [The Florida Project](#), which came out this past year, it's this amazing narrative take on America. Very beautiful aesthetically, heartbreaking, and very honest in its portrayal of these children and their lives. The last shot they filmed secretly on an iPhone in Walt Disney World and they did a really amazing protest with that shot.

Name

Meg Remy

Vocation

Musician



Photo credit: Colin Medley