

On balancing your creative interests



Writer and label head Nabil Ayers discusses making things for yourself first and knowing when it's time to focus on one creative outlet over another.

June 20, 2022 -

As told to Max Freedman, 2350 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Beginnings](#), [Business](#), [Collaboration](#), [Focus](#).

Your memoir is rooted in the fact that you've always known that the famous jazz musician Roy Ayers is your father, even though his presence in your life growing up was minimal. How do you think family and genetics influence one's creative experience?

I started to really think about it and learn more in hindsight in the process of writing this book. But before that, as a kid, I didn't connect it much to the fact that I played drums from birth. My uncle bought me a drum set when I was two...in my head, I was always like, "Well, my father's a musician, so it makes sense that I'm into music and I play music,"...but I paid a lot less attention to the fact that my mom is a dancer who was super into music, who played music around me constantly. Every memory I have, there's music playing, and she would talk about what it is and why it's important and all that stuff.

It sounds like your family was taking you to do things they were interested in more than trying to force a creative practice on you.

Right, totally, yeah. It wasn't like, "Go do [something]"...to the degree that, by the time I decided to take lessons when I was about 10, it was really hard because all I'd done was spend eight years playing along to records and doing what I wanted with zero discipline or practice. To suddenly have someone be like, "Here's how you play these rudiments and parallels," I was just like, "I don't even know what you're talking about, and why would I want to do that? I can already play along with my Def Leppard songs." It almost inhibited any kind of traditional disciplined practice. I prefer the way that it happened, but it made it really hard. I was never good at lessons, and [I'm] still scared of them.

How has your perspective on lessons influenced your creative practice?

In a good way. My writing is a very new thing. I loved writing in college but never took it that seriously. Five or six years ago, I just got into it and thought, "Well, I went to college, but I don't have any formal training per se. I took some writing classes, but I have thoughts and stories. And I just want to start writing them for some reason." There was some internal pull that just said, "It's time to start doing this." It might have just been that I was old enough and could remember everything so well still and liked telling stories. I just started doing it for no reason and with no goal.

It felt so safe to just type whatever I wanted. I wasn't trying to publish anything. No one knew I was doing it. I was just doing it for myself. There's this incredible safety and comfort in that. It really allowed me to take risks and write about, and think about, things that were harder than if someone had said, "Hey, will you write something and we're going to publish it." There's no way I would've immediately jumped into the things that I'm

into now. It took these kinds of steps. I think that sort of undisciplined, figure it out, trust yourself thing that I had with music applied directly to the writing practice as well.

What are some of the disadvantages of going into writing without any formal training?

The disadvantage, of course, is all the self-doubt that I think everyone experiences...working on something, writing something for two hours and being like, "This is shit, it's written like shit, this story is shit, who would ever want to read this? I don't even want to read this." That feeling, that's really hard.

I know everybody has that experience, but a lot of people who have that experience can then talk to their writer friend, their former teacher, their mentor, their boss or whatever, and say, "Hey, I've been working on this thing. It's been really hard. What do you do when you get in this situation?" And because I was sort of doing it—I don't want to say in secret, because it wasn't in secret, but on my own—I didn't have the confidence to tell people, even my friends, "Hey, I've been writing some stuff." So there's no one to look to in those situations, except that I was in my 40s and had been through that with music and work and was at least able to apply other situations to that.

It's good when that happens and I go away and come back or approach it from a different angle. ... It would've been nice to have people to talk to about it, but now thinking about it, I absolutely did have those people. I was just afraid to introduce the fact that I was working on it.

On a more practical level, I'm curious how you balance managing a prominent label group [Beggars Group US] with occasionally writing.

In January, I left 4AD and I now run Beggars US. It was crazy timing. It was the same week I announced the book. For a while, [balancing my job and writing] was absolutely no problem because I would just write [on] mornings and weekends. It was a hobby. It was something I did in my free time.

Once I started to publish some things, I started to think about it more. It didn't start to take any more time, and I would publish, in a great year, four or five pieces. It wasn't taking a ton of time. It was taking a lot of my free time because I loved it, but it wasn't taking away from anything else in my life. But that's when I started to at least think, "I wonder what my coworkers think. I wonder what the bands I work with think now," especially when it's published in Pitchfork.

I would worry that people are going to see me sort of invading a world that I'm not supposed to be on that side of, writing about music. And I don't write about that much music, and even the times I have, I still don't feel like that's what I'm doing. I wrote a Pitchfork Sunday review for a [Bad Brains album](#), which is very much an album review, but to me, it was still more about the context of that album and, in a way, how it applied to my life and what it did for me. It's still a bit more memoir-ish than music reporting. But I definitely started to think about that [sense of invading a world], but everyone was really supportive and said nice things. There's never [been] a moment where people thought or said, "What are you doing? This is getting in the way."

I've also been careful to not talk about or write about work stuff, partially because it's not interesting to me in that way. I love my job and I love the work, but I don't want to write about streaming rates and profit-share deals with bands.

I'm wondering if all the numbers and whatnot are less interesting to you because you have a background as a musician yourself.

Sort of. ... I've always been interested in the business part, and there are a lot of weird little parts in the book about this where I didn't realize it while it was happening. When I was seven years old, I tried to put on a show with my friends in our living room, and we charged a dollar, and at the end, we had \$10, and we sat around and we split the money. I put up posters for the show the day before because I knew that's how you would get people to come. I'm not sure where or how I figured out how to do that when I was seven, but I knew that was a

thing to do, and it worked, and then we split the money and it felt great. So it wasn't just, "Ah, I just played drums. That was so fun." I always recognize the two sides to it. I'm still in the same place.

I'm curious if you could talk about the creative aspects of running a label.

One of the 4AD band managers who I talk to all the time, who I consider a friend, has been very interested in the book. We were just talking anecdotally about all this stuff, and I was telling him, "This is just so stressful, and I wonder if I'm going to get this review or be able to do this thing, and I'm thinking about it. It's keeping me up at night."

He was like, "This is great. Everyone who works in the music business or on the business side of any creative business should have to do some kind of creative endeavor on their own every 10 years...just to learn or to remember...what it [feels] like to be in a band." He said, "Everyone should have to feel like you do, to be more sympathetic or empathetic to understand more what's going on in these artists' heads every day." Which I think is true. And it's definitely not something I've lost sight of, but it's something I feel a lot more connected to right now. It's so similar.

The funnest stuff, the best album campaigns come from when an artist has an idea and we bring in people and ideas, try to improve it, spend money on it, bring in partners, and try to amplify the artist's vision. That's what we're really good at. And I think that's a big part of what labels, whether they're one-person operations or massive major labels, should do.

I love being in the room when those things are happening. My favorite thing is actually contributing to what an artist wants to do and improving the idea or building on it, which always feels creative to me. The best, most exciting parts are when there are four or 10 or 20 of us in the room and an idea happens, and someone else adds to it, and someone else adds to it, and then it changes. And then suddenly, in five minutes, there's actually this thing, and we do it, and it's really cool. Those are the times that are like, alright, that's why we're here. That's why there's a benefit to this group of people and the setup. And that's really exciting.

I take it that you aren't really doing much of your own music these days, whether writing music or playing music. I'm curious how you know when a creative endeavor has run its course with you.

There was definitely a moment. I was in a band called The Long Winters when I lived in Seattle. I joined the band in 2005. We put out an album in 2006. That band toured a lot, especially for guys in our 30s, which seemed old at the time. We toured for two big U.S. tours, two big European tours, and lots of other one-offs and fly-outs. And then, that was kind of winding down, and we were talking about making a new album.

That's when I was thinking about moving to New York, because I was really having fun and success with my own label, The Control Group, which I started in 2000. ... [When I chose to focus on the label], it wasn't, "I'm quitting playing music," but it was definitely, "I'm setting myself up to finally focus 100% on the business side." It wasn't actually quitting music in my head, but it was definitely taking a year off, establishing the business. Even though I wasn't quitting music, it was a conscious moment to finally, after juggling these three things, to say, "This is the one I'm working on. This is the one I'm choosing." The creative pursuit that's been calling my name since that show, when I was seven years old, it was finally time to focus on that part of it.

It really wasn't, "I'm sick of touring or sick of being in the band," because I was sick of that stuff when I was 22, but you just keep doing it because it's awesome. And the hard parts are brutal every day. It's so terrible, but it's also so great and so fun. And when you're not doing it, you miss it. And when you're doing it, you kind of hate it. I don't think it was, "I'm at an age where I need to stop doing this." It was, "I'm at an age where I need to start doing the other thing and take it more seriously if I want this to be part of it."

That was everything I wanted to ask you, but if you had anything you forgot to say to any of the questions earlier that's been in your head like, "I need to get this out," I'll leave the floor open to you.

I still want to start a band. I think about it all the time. I don't actually want to do it, but I think about it all the time. And it makes me happy and excited that, now that I'm 50 and have a book coming out and I'm the president of a record company, I still want to do the thing that got me excited about all of it in the first place because that's still really fun. And I miss playing drums every day.

Nabil Ayers Recommends:

five reasons to stop what you're doing for five minutes:

Sly & the Family Stone performing on Ed Sullivan in 1969

Roy Ayers Ubiquity "live" on Soul Train in 1976

Bad Brains live at CBGB in 1982

PJ Harvey live on the Tonight Show in 1993

The Gossip performing on Letterman in 2008

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Vocation

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