

On advocating for your own work and trusting your instincts



Actor and performer Megan Mullally on having a separate creative life outside of *Will & Grace*, taking credit for your work and ideas, trusting your instincts, and understanding that there is no linear path to success.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3863 words.

Tags: [Comedy](#), [Music](#), [Acting](#), [Beginnings](#), [Collaboration](#), [Inspiration](#), [Success](#).

In addition to your work on *Will & Grace*, you have your own band, Nancy And Beth—it's a band, but it's also a meticulously choreographed cabaret/comedy show that's very funny and demented and sort of impossible to describe. How important is it, outside of your work on television, to have a project like this? Something that allows you to do whatever you want?

It's the most important thing to me right now. This band is really maybe the first time—or one of the *only* times—that I've felt like, "Oh, okay so I have autonomy here and I can do whatever I want." I mean, we really just do whatever we want—whatever we think is interesting or witty or weird or funny or very sad, we do that. We, being Stephanie Hunt and I. It's so important to me right now to have something that is really pure, just purely my creative expression and that of Stephanie's as well because we are very much individuals, but we're also a unit to a certain degree because there is an incredible psychic twinship between us.

There are other things that I get to do that are incredible. But for me music was actually my first love, back from when I was very little. Music and dance were my first passions. I spent my entire childhood going into my bedroom as an only child and shutting the door and putting on a record that I borrowed from my parents' collection. They had a couple of records of theme songs from movies, so they were instrumentals. I would come up with incredibly dramatic dances and performance art pieces to each of the songs. I would decide what the story was of this particular song and I would work on it in front of one of those little mirrors from the drug store that you lean up against the wall. I would work on it until I had it perfected and then I would summon my mother to come and give me an unfailingly rave review. So that was my whole childhood. That and believing in elves and fairies and trying to get my friends to play elves and fairies and failing miserably.

So that was everything to me back then, and it basically still is. It's exactly what Stephanie and I are doing. We're making up little dances as children in our rooms and showing it to our moms. There's a song that we used to do before every show, back when we first started out doing shows at Largo in L.A. We used to stand off stage right with tambourines and do the White Stripes song, "Little Room"—*When you're in your little room and you're working on something good, but if it's really good you're going to need a bigger room. When you're in the bigger room you might not know what to do. You might have to think of how you got started sitting in the little room.*

So that's our mission statement. Or if we were analytical enough to have one, that would be it. People have a very hard time trying to quantify or interpret what we do because it doesn't really fall into any category. Are we a band? Is this a comedy show? People who write for jazz outlets are trying to approach it from a jazz standpoint. People who write for cabaret outlets are trying to approach it from cabaret, but it's not really

cabaret. I'm grateful for anyone who sees us and tries to talk about it. Can someone from a screamo outlet come and write about us? Anybody is welcome. We want to subvert expectations by getting booked into the widest variety of venues possible. Everything from dive bars to the Sydney Opera House. And we've done that. We've played a lot of smaller venues. We've played dinner theater. We've played The Grand Ole Opry. We've played the Newport Folk Festival, World Festival Hall, and everything in between.

One of the hardest things for actors and filmmakers is that you're always kind of in the position of having to ask permission to do this thing you're good at. Please cast me! Please hire me! It's a constant process of asking for approval. It must be gratifying to create your own thing where you can do and say and act however you want.

Oh Yeah. You have to be a rebel at heart and you have to not care what anyone thinks. I mean the funny part is that, despite my long career, nobody even knows I sing. They think I'm just an actress on a sitcom, and that's fine, too. It's starting to change now and part of that is because of social media. I can make it clear on my Instagram that, "Hey! I do this other thing too!" However, I didn't even start acting until much later... in college, really. And even then I had absolutely no clue what I was doing. And most of the work that I did when I lived in Chicago was musicals. I also supported myself singing jingles.

Let's bring Stevie Nicks into this, because why not? I was in a rock band in high school. Then in college I ended up being in a jazz trio that also played blues. But in between those two things there was the summer after my senior year in high school when a young, 23-year-old guy who considered himself to be something of an entrepreneur from Oklahoma City, got me and this pretty excellent guitar player together and got us booked at a club in Westwood, which, in 1977, was the hottest place to be in Los Angeles. It was the main drag. The place was called Yesterdays. The ground floor was a restaurant. Top floor was a club. And we played there for the entire summer. I lost my virginity with the help of half of a Quaalude while working there. We sang the entire Fleetwood Mac record, *Rumours*. We did basically every song on the record to great acclaim. So that's what I would like to say about Stevie Nicks and my career in music. You never know where things will lead you.

Do you remember a specific moment where you were like, "Oh, acting! This is really happening. I should do this."?

You know, I remember acting and putting on shows when I was three years old, but beyond that... not really? I applied for a job once at Book Soup in Los Angeles because I'm an avid reader. The only thing I could imagine myself doing was sitting around reading while waiting for something else to happen, while also making up creative, weird things in my head.

I think by nature I view myself as a little more avant garde or something, but I'm perceived as being extremely mainstream. And that's fine, too. I can do that. But, something I'm dealing with right now—hopefully in a constructive way—is not getting credit for things that I do that are totally my creation and are solely coming from me. For example, the choreography we do in the band. I create that. Also, the book that [my husband] Nick [Offerman] and I wrote. I designed the entire book, *everything*, every detail, every photograph, the fonts, the hand lettering, the drawings. I did it all, *all of it*, just because I wanted to. I wasn't hired or paid to do it, I just wanted to.

And I don't know the extent to which people actually really think that I did that or even know that I did. It's that kind of thing. I just want credit where credit is due. I think sometimes being a woman, especially being a woman of a certain age, people don't automatically recognize your abilities. I have found that there are still certain things, certain projects, where I need Nick as my entrée, as my calling card, in order to make it happen. And immediately, once Nick is onboard, they're like, "Oh, yes! Of course!" But it's all my idea. It was all my idea to do the book. This is not to take away from Nick, but I mean I had to push for that.

I look at someone like Miranda July, who is such a genius. Think of everything she's done—novels, films, artwork, short stories—everything she does is so incredible. Why don't more people know about it? Why isn't she more celebrated? Smart, weird work by incredible women is still a bit of niche market, unfortunately.

The world is full of terrible egomaniacs who try and take credit for everything, but I find that there are way more people who are made to feel embarrassed about asking to be recognized for their work. You're supposed to

adopt some kind of false humility instead of just being like, "Hey, I did this." It shouldn't be embarrassing.

That's exactly where I am right now, because I've generally been so reticent to speak up and be like, "Actually, that was my idea. And I did all of that by myself. I directed people as to how to execute this project. I directed these music videos. They don't simply just exist. I made them." I want to do more directing, there are a lot of things I'd like to do, but it's harder than you think. It's interesting to me that people often have this fixed idea of what you are and they only want you to be that. And I'm really fine with that. But I also feel like there are those who kind of see deeper into my work and they kind of get who I really am and what I'm really doing, and would enjoy what I would like to do.

You play what is arguably one of the most iconic sitcom characters in the history of television...

And I'm very, very grateful for that.

So the idea that you would still have to leverage someone else's name in order to get creative projects off the ground is maddening.

It's a fact. And just to go back to the idea of taking ownership of your own work and advocating for yourself. It's true for men also, but it's especially tricky for women. You feel like, "Oh, I'm being braggy or people are going to think that I'm pushy or aggressive and I'm not a real girl or I'm being bitchy." I don't know what they fucking think. But it's almost like you can't see the forest through the trees. It's so ingrained. It's just been really in the last year or two—and I'm 60 years old!—that I've been like, "Oh, wait. I really need to do that. I need to stand up for myself more. That's fair."

Things that you become known for—a hit song, an iconic role—can become like a gilded cage. There are certainly worse problems to have, but when you are associated with such an iconic character in people's minds, it must become a kind of chore to work around that. For so many people, you are Karen Walker, forever.

Well, but here's the vast irony—I love playing Karen Walker on *Will & Grace*. I want to do 5,092 more seasons of it, which is a terrible negotiating strategy for any further seasons that might come our way. But I've always been very vocal about that. I feel like the luckiest person. You're going to be an actor and it's like the dream scenario to get to play one of the funniest, most well-written, most interesting, weird, crazy, messed-up characters in the history of multi-cam sitcoms, if you will. It's a gift.

I loved shows like *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* when I was a kid. I obsessively watched television. I also had lots of comedy records as a kid. I had the Smothers Brothers and Bill Cosby and Redd Foxx and Phyllis Diller and Bob Newhart. I had all of them, which is weird because I was never a comedy person. It never actually dawned on me that I might be interested in doing comedy, or I might have an understanding of comedy until literally I was in the middle of filming the first season of *Will & Grace*. It was like, "Oh, I might be sort of better at this than is normal."

You've done a lot of different kinds of work. People might not realize how much work you've done in the theater, for example.

That was my first big break. I really *only* did theater early on. I mean, I did little guest spots on television shows here and there after I moved to Los Angeles...

I have seen your Murder, She Wrote episode multiple times.

I knew it! Yes, everybody and their brother has seen that episode. When I got that particular job I hadn't worked for nearly two years and I got offered the part off of my demo reel. I didn't even have an audition. That had never happened to me before. And it paid \$5,000. I fell to my knees and wept because that would pay my rent for three months. During that time I did tons of musicals in Chicago. I also did some plays. I knew that I could be amusing and I knew that I had a weird take on certain roles. So I'd get a role and I would have a different take

on it than would be the regular "by the numbers" version. So I did know that about myself. I had a lot of boyfriends who, when I was really being myself, would say, "You're so weird"--but not in a nice way. And I thought, they must be onto something here. I'm breaking up with you now, but thanks for that because that helped me a lot.

I wanted to go to New York and audition for Broadway musicals, but I was dating a guy in Chicago who said, "Oh, let's go to Los Angeles first for a month and then we'll go to New York for a month." I said, "All right." And then I got signed at William Morris within the first two weeks I was there. It's a very long story of how that happened. I won't bore you with that. But I got signed at William Morris, which was the biggest agency by far on the planet at that time in 1985. And then I started getting all these auditions and I actually booked some jobs like The Ellen Burstyn Show—the first television show I auditioned for—starring Ellen Burstyn and Elaine Stritch. I played Ellen's daughter. Elaine played Ellen's mother. She was five years older than Ellen in real life. Go figure.

People have such weird ideas about how this business actually works, so I'll tell this story. Another big break came to me because I had gone to college with this guy named Jeff Calhoun at Northwestern. He moved to New York and he somehow got hooked up with Tommy Tune and they decided to direct a production of Grease on Broadway. And he found my number somehow—probably literally in the actual phone book—and called me in Los Angeles and said, "I really want you to do the show." And I said, "Okay." LA wasn't working out the way I thought and Broadway is really what I thought I would be doing this whole time. At this point I was 34, playing a 17-year-old in Grease. Showbiz!

So then from there, there was a guy in the cast, Paul Castree, who's an excellent Broadway veteran and a hilarious and great guy, and he said, "You know, they're doing a new production of How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying. Matthew Broderick is in it and you are really right for the lead role in that." I didn't know the show, so I rented the movie on VHS and it took me like three days to finish watching it. I auditioned. I was an unknown. I was completely unknown to everybody in the room. They already had another person in mind for the role. She wasn't happy about it, but eventually I did get the part.

And that was really my big break because when that show was out of town in La Jolla Playhouse there was a guy who's still around who wrote about it and he really focused on me quite a bit in that review. I had left William Morris at that point and things were kind of stalled out. That experience got me a really good agent. And then everything kind of started taking shape. That was in 1995. And then in 1998 I got Will & Grace.

It's hard to hear when you're still on the other side of things and you're trying to make something happen and it hasn't happened yet, but I think it's good to hear stories like that because it shows you that there are many weird paths toward success and often it's because of friends, or because of the people who you befriend on the way up, that things eventually take off. There isn't one linear path—and it's not always about studying or having the best agent.

Right. I didn't take acting classes, for example. I didn't study. I mean we have extremely nice agents so I hesitate to say this, but I don't really get jobs through my agents. I'd like to say that I did, but I don't. Nobody does. I mean, ask anybody. It doesn't really work that way.

When people ask for acting advice, what they're really asking is, "Well, how do I get an agent? How do I get a manager?" But in the more altruistic sense, what kind of advice do you have about how to be a good actor? A good performer?

So much of it is trusting your own instincts. Like really, just what is it that you think is good? What gives you that feeling that it's right when you do it or when you write it or when you see it or when you speak it? It's that. And then just trusting that. And it's hard. It can be extremely hard to get to that point because you doubt yourself and you think, "Well, I want to do it the way Laurie Metcalf does it." But you're not Laurie Metcalf and, sadly, neither am I. You have to figure out what you are good at, what feels good, and then do that. Do it as much as you can.

Megan Mullally Recommends:

Ok, here is my crazy stream of consciousness list of things that I love and recommend.

For anyone who is reading this article, please leave this page right now, and go to YouTube and type in, "[Betty Buckley Rose's Turn from Gypsy](#)." It will blow your mind. I don't care what line of work you're in, you must see this performance. It's insanity. I thought Patti Lupone's version was good, and it was, but this was incredible.

I read mostly fiction. I've always liked that because I feel like I kind of act out the novel in my head. Like I make the movie of it in my head while I'm reading it. I have lots of books to recommend.

[Disgrace](#) by J.M. Coetzee.

[Train Dreams](#) by Denis Johnson.

[Ian McEwan](#), just in general.

A recent book by Lisa Halliday called [Asymmetry](#).

[The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn](#)

[The House at Pooh Corner](#)

[Can't and Won't](#) by Lydia Davis. Lydia Davis is beyond the realm.

[Lincoln in the Bardo](#) by George Saunders.

Oh, I love that trilogy by Rachel Cusk that begins with [Outline](#). She's such a pristine writer. Every word.

[The First Bad Man](#), Miranda July. All of Miranda July's books.

[Redeployment](#) by Phil Klay. I thought, "Well, I have no interest in this, in the military." But it turns out I had a vast interest in it because the variety of approaches that each story takes is incredible.

Oh, films!

[Mustang](#), that Turkish film from 2015. Incredible.

[Girlhood](#) may be my favorite french film, I think from 2015, directed by a woman, Celine Sciamma.

[Toni Erdmann](#), the German film that won an Oscar.

I was also very inspired by [Moonlight](#), which won the Oscar. And [The Florida Project](#), which was completely overlooked, the Sean Baker film from 2017. The last minute and a half of [The Florida Project](#), I'd put that up against anything I've ever seen on film.

Music!

I always go back to Joni Mitchell's [Blue](#). It means so much to me. "[Clair De Lune](#)." Certain pieces of classical music that I listened to so much when I was in high school that were inspiring to me. [Mule Variations](#) by Tom Waits to the list of records. Anything by [Randy Newman](#). He is my all-time fave, hands-down, all of his records.

What else?

[Maya Plisetskaya](#)! If you can go to, you know, the Library of Congress or something and find the old, old film of her [performing the Dying Swan](#). She was a great, Russian prima ballerina. It's so incredible. I was lucky to be studying at school in American Ballet in the '70s. [Gelsey Kirkland](#), you know, New York City Ballet School and Gelsey Kirkland it was her era. Baryshnikov. [Ivan Nagy](#) performed there frequently.

My mom was so cool to take me to all the ballets and Broadway shows. I saw the original [Chicago](#) with Gwen Verdon and Chita Rivera and that was a huge thing for me. I'm like re-birthing over [Fosse/Verdon](#) right now. I got to see the original [A Chorus Line](#) like the night after it opened on Broadway. Rob Marshall's [Cabaret](#) really changed my life, I must say. I couldn't even function after I saw that. I thought it was the greatest thing I'd ever seen. I had to walk up and down the block for like 20 minutes before I could even start thinking again.

Isabelle Huppert and Marion Cotillard. The great French actresses. I love [the Dardenne Brothers](#). All of their films are incredible, are masterpieces.

Oh, [Lypsinka](#)! I was very inspired by Lypsinka. And when I met her I almost tore her to shreds. It's like after I saw that production of [Cabaret](#) I thought, "Please, God, don't let me run into any of the actors on the street because I will hurt them physically with my enthusiasm." But Lypsinka was so incredible. I got to meet her once. I was a total nobody, but I was so ardent that they let me go to her dressing room and talk to her.

Please, go listen, go watch, go read, go love all of these things and all of these people.

Name

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Vocation

Actor, Comedian, Singer

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