

On seizing the moment



Artist and activist Madame Gandhi on working with people you love and admire, pursuing creative opportunities as they appear, and setting your own standards.

January 31, 2023 -

As told to Max Freedman, 2635 words.

Tags: Music, Activism, Beginnings, Business, Collaboration, First attempts, Independence, Money, Politics, Success.

I believe you're in London right now. Why are you there today?

Romance has me in London. Love has me in London. Because of this romance and love, over the past six months, the [mini-]album [*Vibrations*] got finished in London. You'll get on a plane for romance, and then the byproduct is incredible, inspired music.

You're called your last three projects mini-albums, but they're EP-length. Why have you chosen this labeling?

I've been calling [*Vibrations*] a short-form album. The main reason is that, to me, an EP signifies this unfinished product, or there's more to come, or it's not the final thing. There's a finality about these three projects that "EP" didn't quite fit. "EP" almost feels like, "here's my demo. Here's my first shot at the world." Three years of work went into each of these small, short albums. They had more to offer than a rough sketch.

What does the space you're creating in need to have available to fit your creative process?

I like to feel really connected emotionally and spiritually with the people who I'm making music with. I've never done well when they put me in random writing sessions, because it lacks the opportunity to get to know the person. The idea is, the more you're working with people in studios, the higher chance you're going to write songs. You're creating that mathematical opportunity to get in the studio with random people every day, hoping there's chemistry. For me, that has never worked because I don't feel safe.

Usually, I'm meeting somebody through friends or through a hang, or maybe through Instagram because I'm already a fan of their work. Then, we spend time together. We have to be very spiritually connected. Do we want to go and have dinner after the session? That kind of thing. Then, I can be real, sing vulnerable lyrics, feel celebrated, feel loved, feel cherished.

There's also generosity on both sides when it comes to the more challenging conversations around songwriting splits, fairness, and who gets what. We're able to have more fluid conversations, like, "What feels good for you? What doesn't feel so good?" We get it right, and then there's a desire to keep working.

The person who mixed my album, Neil Comber, and I worked together on the M.I.A. tour 10 years ago. He's mixed every song I've ever put out. Piper Payne, my mastering engineer, same thing. Building long-term relationships with people who are my dear friends, when there's real sincerity in the dynamic, allows me to make my best music.

What does collaboration achieve for you?

The start of my process is, I'll sit down in my studio, I'll open up Ableton Live, and I'll work on a sketch for a song, either by singing vocals a *capella* into the mic and drafting some ideas, or by creating a beat and then singing on top of it. I turn my ideas that have the heaviest emotion into songs, because music and songwriting is a timestamp of emotion. There was this really powerful emotion and, *boom*, I've put it into something tangible that other people can experience. That's the first thing that gets me to open the laptop, because I trust the depth, quality, and intensity of the emotion.

Then, I'll make a beat around it, or I'll record the a *capella*. From there, the songs that I think are the best or most interesting, I will send to some friends and say, "I would love to work on this with you," or "Do any of these songs speak to you? Which one speaks to you? Let's work on that together." It's my producer friends, like [Ebonie Smith](#), Amanda Warner [[MNR](#)]. Will Horrocks [of [LV](#)], who's an incredible Afrobeat producer in London. Anthony Saffery, who's been one of my main collaborators. He was the bassist in a very famous British band called [Cornershop](#). [Caleb Stone](#), another incredible beatmaker from Detroit, who's now L.A.-based. [Zach Witness](#) is one more person I have to mention, who's become my best friend now. He [co-]produced one of the most recent Erykah Badu records [*But You Caint Use My Phone*].

I'll send [the songs] to my frequent collaborators, and they choose which one speaks to them, and we finish it together. I need to work with others who have far more experience than me in arranging, in knowing where the song is too busy and where it can be stripped back, where some textures can be added to further the emotion I'm trying to convey, and to tell me when I'm in my own way. To say, "Let the music speak for itself here. We don't have to put lyrics," or "This is where you should allow the drums to shine more. You're a drummer, and that's one of the most important parts of your project. We absolutely should have a drum solo here."

I like collaboration because it's the yin to the yang. It fills in the areas where I can be pushed, and my music can be developed further.

Your website describes your music as having a positive message about gender liberation and personal power. Where do and don't politics and art, and the personal, all intersect for you?

Music, and the date associated with the music I'm putting out, is connected to my own personal journey. My music in 2016 was a lot more feminist, more punk. I had platinum blonde hair. Hillary Clinton was running for president against Donald Trump. It was the first time we had seen a female candidate in office. Despite the challenges we may all have with either of these candidates, it was a revolutionary moment. We had just had Michelle Obama as one of the most prominent First Ladies we'd ever seen—obviously, a woman of color.

It was a really radical time, so the music reflected that. "[The Future Is Female](#)" was viral on the U.S. Top 50 charts and Spotify. The music had relevance to what was happening politically and globally. My story [running the London Marathon bleeding freely](#) had gone viral. I was being asked to speak all over the world about why menstrual health and menstrual equity is one of the founding pillars of a more liberated future for women, trans folks, people who bleed.

During my own personal evolution and my own spiritual practice, once the pandemic happened, a lot of internal shifts happened. I wasn't able to perform as much. We were all at home. I was forced to do a lot of inside work rather than receiving so much energy from external forces like having me come and perform [or] speak. I had to sit with my own inner mechanics that needed some attention. Out of the pandemic came letting go of drinking and smoking, becoming completely vegan. Eight hours of sleep and saying no to gigs that are at 1 in the morning because I understand the ramification of those times on my health. Meditating on a daily basis.

These aspects of my journey have made the music more thoughtful, introspective, aware, oriented around love, and more inclusive of all genders rather than so pro-LGBTQIA+ rights, so pro-femme at the expense of making men and cisgender folks feel excluded. It's lovely to have so many different types of people, older people, younger people, people of all genders and different ethnic backgrounds saying the album has a spiritual component they resonate with. This is how the personal is political and the political is personal. The music is simply a

reflection of my own personal journey.

Why, upon going viral after the London Marathon, did it feel necessary to seize the moment and start a new creative practice? I ask because I'm under the impression this is what jumpstarted your music career. Would you say that was the moment when you became an artist?

That was the moment I became an artist, absolutely. I was a drummer for M.I.A. I was drumming for TV on the Radio for a couple of shows. I sat in with Thievery Corporation, and those opportunities were so lovely. With touring musicians, you could argue, on the one hand, that we have many opportunities because you can drum for many different people. But you could also argue that you're disposable because, ultimately, it's the artist who's going to get the big budget, the accolades, the long-term career work. It was important for me to diversify my own practice as a musician.

Off the back of the marathon, I was being asked to speak about all these issues that matter to me. What does liberation actually look like? Why can't we talk about one of the most natural processes that allows the human race to exist, which is bleeding every month? Why is it so stigmatized? How can we create safer practices that include people who bleed and people who don't bleed? Why does it have to be this tense topic? In having to critically think about these issues, they naturally gave way to messaging that worked well in a body of music. It made sense for it to live in a body of music and in intellectual spaces like conferences, fireside chats, and keynote presentations. I wanted to activate my creative and intellectual sides.

Off the back of speaking, people would ask, "You're a musician, play us a couple of songs after you speak," and I'd be like, "I'm just the drummer for other people. I don't have my own music." In a way, I was given the chance to already have a built-in audience for my music before the music even existed. I was already wanting to put my thoughts into a body of musical work, while also feeling safe because I was being asked to share it before it even existed.

You hosted a TED Talk about conscious music consumption. How does this conscientious perspective play into your creative process?

When I'm thinking about lyrics, I don't just put whatever. I think, "Can many different people sing this back to themselves and resonate with it, feel like they were actually receiving benefit from it?" In Hinduism, there is the concept of *mantra*, repeating back to yourself a phrase that affirms a desirable behavior, or that allows us to connect with a...spiritual value we want to uphold in our own life. Music, to me, and lyrics, are like mantras.

Those lyrics can be used to further oppress [or] affirm problematic, restrictive norms in society, or they can be used to design a world that's just a little better, more positive, more inclusive, more orienting us toward being the light [and] shining so we can empower each other to be our truest and most loving selves. I think often about, "How can my lyrics be these subtle, joyful mantras that make each person who listens to my music walk with just a little bit more personal power, more desire to make the world a better place?"

How do you distinguish your own definition of creativity and success from what your audience thinks? Similarly, since you have a background in data, how do you distinguish your definition of creativity and success from what data and metrics tell you?

First and foremost, I have to know that I've done my best. For example, [*Vibrations*] was supposed to come out earlier than December [2022], but it wasn't ready. There's always the [choice of], just push through to meet the deadline, or take the extra time to really get it right. For me, getting it right is listening back and having no notes. When there's no notes, then it's done. When there's still notes, then there's still work to be done. My own definition of success is when I have no notes left, then I've done my best. I've done everything in my power to make the music the best it could possibly be according to my skill set and my ear.

When we put out the music video for "Waiting For Me," which was shot in India right before the pandemic, it was lovely to have label support in promoting the video on YouTube. I saw how having that label support increased the number of views. It's a bit tricky that we live in a world where there's nothing organic left anymore. You pay

the money, the music gets advertised, and then it goes where it needs to go.

Where the fairness exists is longevity. If everybody's buying advertising and digital marketing spend, I'd like to believe the good stuff wins out. The stuff that really resonates and that people want to share organically is the stuff that does well. That would be one way I define success: After all the marketing spend, are people genuinely wanting to share the music with their friends and family and keep [it] alive because they love it?

I would say, personal success is when people just light up. After my shows, they want to come and say thank you. They want to buy the merch because they want to support me. They want to tell their friends and family. I think this is the number-one. I get to see the resonant impact of the music on real humans.

To what extent do you treat your creative practice as a business, and how have you figured out how to make a living through your creative pursuits?

I never felt like I was the jack of all trades and master of none. Apparently, the rest of that limerick continues and says in different words, "I would rather be somebody who is engaging in many different activities, because it nourishes us as humans." I very much feel that way. Being just one artist who makes money off Spotify streams never resonated with me. If that did, then I would have to be in the studio all the time pumping out songs and making sure I'm filling that need.

Instead, I enjoy receiving, one day, income as a DJ at a queer wedding. The next day, I enjoy writing music for a score. I have a film coming out on MSNBC called *Periodical*, about menstrual health. I scored the entire documentary. I enjoy when my music is synced on [TV] shows. That's an incredible source of income. I love speaking at universities and high schools because academics was a huge part of my upbringing. Teaching yoga, meditation, AcroYoga. These are practices that have made my journey on this earth better. It's almost my duty to share that joy with somebody else in hopes it touches them the same way it has touched and saved me.

I have chosen to diversify my stream of income because I'm a person who enjoys and benefits from being a multi-faceted person. Others are very focused and disciplined on being the master of one thing, being the go-to person for that one job. I commend that, but that's never been my truth. Ultimately, we have to accept who we are and optimize for that.

Madame Gandhi Recommends:

Chopra App—I love doing the daily 21-day meditations on Deepak Chopra's app!

Follow Sadhguru on Instagram—I love his light-hearted perspective on spirituality and interpersonal relations

Take an acroyoga class! Take a boxing class! So amazing to feel strong and confident in the body! Meet cool people!

Drink matcha—my favorite brands to make it at home are Ippodo, Marukyu Koyamaen, and Kettl

Read You Were Born For This—Chani Nicholas's book on Astrology is my favorite self-journey manual to understanding deeper parts of ourselves

Name

Madame Gandhi

Vocation

musician, speaker, activist

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Lindsey Byrnes