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As told to Lauren Spear, 2249 words.

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On finding success in the everyday

Artist Jonah Yano discusses how a song comes to be, what vulnerability looks like in music, and his own personal understanding of success.

Where do songs come from?

Songs, in my head, are everywhere. In everything we experience and live through, and think about and feel. The song that you write is sort of like a windsock, a hydroelectric dam or a sail that moves the boat. It's a way to synthesize the experience that is invisible. Sometimes it feels like it's coming from absolute magic or something—it doesn't feel like anything that makes any sort of sense. But I think ultimately that's what it is, is the need to replicate something that is not able to be replicated. In writing a song, I'm just trying to get as close to the "thing" as possible. I also think everybody has a different way of doing it, that's why songs always sound so different.

Have you ever overwritten a song?

I think I'm overwriting all the time. If anything, I underwrite more than overwrite. I try to write songs consistently, but I'm not prolific in any sense. Songs come really slowly and are few and far between. When I'm writing, I feel lucky if I'm able to even finish the song and it's rare that I have too much to say or a lot to edit down. Generally what I end up with is as much as I could possibly bring out of myself, and it isn't usually very much. It's not a big downpour of rain, I've got to work really hard just to get a couple of words that mean anything to me.

What do you do when the songs don't come?

I think I just wait. Right now is a pretty good example of that. The last, I don't know, I would say three months or so, there just have been no songs and that's fine. I'm excited for when they come back, but when they're not coming, I just put my mind elsewhere and try to live the life that I'm writing about. For me, I think if I'm writing songs all the time, I end up not writing about anything because I'm not living anything that I can reflect on.

Do you think this period of not writing has anything to do with the fact that you're releasing an album soon and those songs are still sitting with you?

I think a small part, yeah. There's the way in which it feels clogged in my mind, the string of songs because the songs on my album haven't left the privacy of my own hands. But I think it has more to do with the fact that I'm actually quite happy and there's nothing really bothering me too much and there's nothing that I really feel I have to communicate. There is no story that I really need to tell right now.

I see that as being a vulnerable choice in songwriting. Do you agree? And also, what do you think vulnerability looks like in music?

I think I agree, on some level, that I'm speaking from a vulnerable place in music, but I also think that it's easy for me to present that face forward with the hard things to talk about. I don't feel threatened or nervous by the prospect of sharing the really hard things to share, so I guess it is coming from a vulnerable place, but I definitely don't feel vulnerable. I honestly think a vulnerable choice would be trying to write a happy song because I don't think I'm very good at it. I feel confident in my ability to speak to the harder things in my life, but I don't feel super confident in my ability to be light or speak with levity in music. I think maybe my natural tendency is to write about the things that are hard for me to talk about because they're easier to sing and simplify into small poetry or prose. I like condensing these really hard ideas and feelings into very digestible little packages, kind of like a Trojan horse or something.

I hear vulnerability as risk-taking and as a spur-of-the-moment expression. An example is at the end of the Big Thief song, "Love Love Love" where Adrienne Lenker is just yelling, "my love, my love!" It's that feeling where you forget what you're doing, you forget the fact that you're recording music or writing your book or doing your painting or cooking your meal. You're getting that little pocket of space where it's just a little vacuum and the world has paused and you're in the feeling. That to me is a vulnerable thing to share with the world.

Do you think there is a difference between being vulnerable while recording versus being vulnerable while performing?

I think recording music inherently is a lot easier in terms of feeling vulnerable, just because you're usually in a really controlled environment like at your house or your friend's house or at a studio. You have all this time, depending on your process, to perfect every single aspect of how you're presenting yourself and it's very prim and proper. Basically, you're standing in front of the mirror, changing your outfit a million times before you go to the party. With playing the live show, it's more like you're walking and doing your groceries and then someone grabs you right off the street and puts you on the stage in front of however many people. You're wearing whatever outfit you're wearing and you don't get to think about it.

You're just standing there and people are just looking at you and you have to be who you are without any sort of revisions, which I like. I think it's a very fun place to explore aspects of yourself that you might not otherwise be able to connect with, like your ability to engage lots of people at one time, which I don't think outside of performing music I'm any good at. I cannot tell a story to ten people at the party, I'm always the listener at the table. I think that's the main difference: the inability to revise versus the ability to have infinite revisions.

Do you favor one over the other?

If I had to choose between the two, I would give up recording and just play live just because I really like exploring the moment as it is and everything that comes along with taking the risk of trying to perform something you've planned in your head. I like the feeling of stepping into the dark, no flashlight, you're just walking with your band or whoever you're playing with or by yourself, walking and just hoping you make it to the other end of the room to get to the door. And once you open the door at the end of the show, all the light comes in and you see the room for what it was, which is usually just an empty room, with no obstacles. You were walking perfectly the whole time, but when you're playing the show, you're in the dark completely. And you're like, "Oh shit, what is it like mouse traps on the ground? Is there a trap door or something that I'm going to fall through?" But there never is. You get you open the door and the lights come on behind you to show an empty room.

I feel as though there are so many ways to be a musician and one way is to have a persona of sorts. But from what I see, you don't have a persona. Do you feel that? If so, do you feel there are different versions of yourself that manifest themselves through music?

I think so, probably. I'm definitely not the same person when I'm at the club dancing as I am when I'm on stage performing. But I think ultimately, even if I had a persona or if I was someone who made songs from a fictional character's point of view, I think that that would not be any less true than what I'm doing. Obviously, we compartmentalize ourselves into different versions based on where we are and what we're doing. Even when I'm singing songs about my real life and real people, I'm still presenting this thing in a way that's not completely true. It's more abstract than that, I think that is sort of a persona in its own way. Maybe it's the version of myself that needs to abstract the more difficult things to talk about in order to share them.

Have you ever written a song that has changed meaning over time, or revealed something to you about yourself?

Most definitely. I think lots of songwriters and writers experience writing something and thinking it means one thing, or nothing and then six months or four years go by, and all of a sudden it's as clear as day. With time, you know exactly what you were saying and what you were trying to tell yourself or somebody else. I even haven't listened to any of my older music in a while, but I bet if I did, I would extrapolate some meaning that I didn't even know I had there. That's one of the best things ever, it's like when you open the fridge and you're surprised you got a couple of more eggs than you thought. Bigger omelet!

For your latest record that has yet to be released, did you have clear intentions around how you wanted it to be made?

I had a pretty good sense of what the record was going to sound like and what it was going to be. But there are other things that you can't really plan for, like the mood that other people are in when you record with them and the mood that you're in when you record. So when we made the record, we were all kind of at the mercy of each other and where we were all at, in our lives, both with inspiration and personally, and how we were all communicating. That, I couldn't plan for. In a lot of instances, it changed my idea of what the song even could be. For example, there's one song on there that I thought was just going to be nylon guitar and me singing but the song actually turned out to be the most drama-heavy song of them all and has these crazy string arrangements! I feel like the beauty of recording is once you enter that space, it's like anything can happen.

What is your version of success?

I think I'm currently on the search to discover what that is. I think I'm trying to separate my understanding of the world of commerce, as it relates to success. So far, I think I'm trying to get to this place where success isn't about anything external and is only about the internal. I feel like a success for me is waking up every day with the willingness to continue living through life. I don't think I associate success with the arts for myself personally, because that's beyond my control entirely, and I'm not looking for any sort of grandeur, accolade or long-winded career or big commercial success or profit. I'm not looking for any of the things that are normally attached to the contemporary idea of success.

Maybe what I'm trying to say is, I think I'm trying to detach myself from the idea of success and the arts entirely, because I don't think that they have anything to do with one another. I think it is a widely accepted concept that success has to do with how much money you make and all the things you've achieved in your life, but I don't think it has anything to do with music. Music is just singing and playing your instrument with people or by yourself. To me, that has nothing to do with winning or losing. It just is the thing you're doing and the thing that's happening.

One of the things that makes a day feel successful is just hanging out with someone. It's so nice to just go for a walk and have a cup of coffee with someone you like, and then go home. And you're like, "damn, that was a good ass day." All you really did was chat with your friend for an hour on the street, but maybe that's all you need sometimes.

That's enough, yeah.

Yeah, truly. Sometimes it's even more innocuous than that. Sometimes it's like, "damn, I made my bed. Not bad, not bad." I think there are so many things that feel good in life every day. But I think one of the best things truly is just hanging out, having a beer with your friend at the bar or going for a walk or hitting the town and doing whatever you want to do.

It's all about connecting with others?

That's it, that's all you can do.

Jonah Yano Recommends:

Looking around instead of ahead.

Having a quiet moment outside or inside with, or without, people you like.

Anything written or said by the poet and writer Mary Ruefle.

Sapporo Ichiban instant ramen original flavor (all the other flavors I could happily live on this world without.)

Texting me if you're my friend and want to go to Bruno for a beer later because life is perfect.

Name

Jonah Yano

Vocation

artist

Fact

Lauren Spear

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