

On spreading your work across your life



An interview with writer and musician Claire L. Evans

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As told to Kailee McGee, 2218 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Music](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#), [Production](#), [Collaboration](#), [Success](#).

You're a multi-hyphenated artist. What is your impulse to do so many different things?

I aggressively do not like being bored, because I tend to fill the silence with anxious thoughts. And I like the feeling of work. I like working. I have a real thing about productivity. Even after I've been touring for weeks, when I'm back home with license to chill—we always order Veggie Grill and watch *Star Trek*—after one day of doing nothing, I feel like a total waste of space.

Is relax in your vocabulary?

I do like to relax; I just like to feel that I deserve it. I had a very puritanical streak as a kid. I was raised a stone-cold atheist by two people who never even mentioned the idea of god, but I still had a strong feeling for right and wrong. It's more of a fear of getting in trouble than a moral code—although I think that can be the same thing. One time when I was a kid, I scared a lizard, and its tail fell off. I felt so guilty that I forced myself to lie in the sun, in the middle of the summer, until I got a sunburn. I don't know what that is. The tail grows back. Maybe it's more that I don't think I deserve self-indulgence or leisure unless I balance it out with hard work and dedication. It's a scale.

And working in one medium would just be boring to you?

I guess so. There was a time in my life when I was just a writer. Music happened to me along the way. I still think of myself as someone who only really does one thing, which is write. Even in the band, I used to always say, "I'm the writer." Rather than say, "I'm the singer." Because I can't sing really very well at all, but I write lyrics, and I write songs.



Photo by Kailee McGee

If you're at a party, what do you say to someone who asks, "What do you do?"

It depends on the person. There's a certain kind of person to whom I would say "musician," and I don't know exactly why. It's the same thing when I'm coming in through customs and I have to write down my occupation on the form. Sometimes I'll put "writer," and sometimes, "musician." At the hypothetical party, if I say musician, people want to know more, and they are more likely to ask, "What band? Have I heard of you?" And that's just the most embarrassing thing to go through. If I say writer, that's a job people have. Maybe people will ask what kind of writer, but probably not.

It seems like you juggle so much with your app, band, writing, and your miscellaneous projects like The Triforium Project. How do you balance all of your projects and make time for real life, too?

This is true for Jona [Bechtolt] too. We work laterally. Instead of just making one pie or putting a bunch of pies in the oven at the same time, it's like: this pie has some jam, and this pie doesn't have the jam yet, and this one's got the second layer of crust. We keep building them all up at the same time. That's a weird analogy. I just mean: we are not doing one thing, or one project, exclusively. Instead, we've just spread work across our life, so there's not really a division between working and relaxing. But everything is low-key: pots on the fire, pies in the oven. And that seems to work. We haven't really gone on a vacation, but we keep talking about it. I feel like we are talking about vacations as a form of vacation.

I don't necessarily believe that the way that I live and do my art is the best or the healthiest way. There's probably a version of me that's way better and more structured. The times that I've had to do really intense projects—like write the book—more structure has been very beneficial, having dedicated "on time" and dedicated "off time." But there are all of these little different things that support my existence, so I can't abandon music, or the band, or the app. It's all about a diversified portfolio of income.

Do you have any domestic rituals that help ensure productivity and creativity?

I really like to do domestic work when I have writer's block. Sometimes if I'm stuck on something, I'll make a soup for three hours, really lovingly. I also like gardening, weeding, and sorting—like sorting through books or clothes and choosing what to get rid of. That way, I can work on an idea quietly, in a more fluid way than I would if I was sitting and working. It opens things up and allows for the possibility of a more complex argument to form in my mind.

Sometimes I go on a drive. I got into car-based writing techniques recently. This is a very Los Angeles thing: I will drive around and dictate into my phone, like I'm narrating a movie. I find that to be very helpful, because when I'm driving, I'm a little bit distracted, and it allows my brain to open up sideways. The other technique I'll do is on the other side of the process—if I need to edit, but I'm not in the mood to sit with a printout—I'll put the text in the Notes app on my phone and have Siri read it to me, text-to-speech, while I'm driving. There's something special about the way that Siri reads. It's really deliberate and it allows me to hear the punctuation marks, because she doesn't quite know what to do when she comes across a comma, a semicolon, or an em-dash. There's a slight tonality to each of the pauses she makes, which are too long, relative to human speech. I find that level of detachment helpful, especially for structural edits.



Photo by Kailee McGee

How do you know when a project is done?

That's a really good question. I don't think you ever know; you just have to make a call. Finishing is acknowledging that there's no further progress to be made at the current juncture. If you sit on a song for 20 years and come back to it with all the wisdom of your life, you could probably write a better song, but objectively, you have to get it out into the world in order to continue to live as an artist. So, there's a sense of: "well, this is as good as it's gonna get for me at my level right now." Sometimes you realize that early, but it can take a long time. I think deadlines were invented by God to make art possible. I don't think I could finish *anything* without a deadline, self-imposed or external. With the book, it was just: these people at Penguin, they don't know me. They have no idea that I can't do this. *I have to do it because otherwise they'll know that I can't do it.*

What do you think is the through line across your work? Is there something that you feel propelled to capture or seek out?

I don't quite know. The one thing that unifies it all is just that it came from my brain. I used to keep things way more siloed, especially in my early science writing career: I was very diligent about demarcation. This is my science writing with a specific voice, and this is my music career, and never the two shall meet. Now it's a lot more ambiguous.

Maybe as a writer I am interested in the past, and as an artist I am interested in the future. I'm interested in preserving things and creating things in equal measure. That feels satisfying. In order to understand how best to preserve things, you have to make things yourself, because then you can understand people's motivations and the nature of their labor. You get what it means to put something out into the world.

You are a creative director of The Triforium Project (a restoration project of a six-story public artwork in Downtown Los Angeles). That is a huge undertaking of preserving something. Why were you drawn to The Triforium? As a writer? As a fan?

A lot of different things were appealing to me about the The Triforium. On a purely aesthetic level, the vision of the future that it represents is one of my favorite utopian delusions: this early 1970s idea that public space could emerge from massive expanses of concrete that are maddeningly unintuitive to actually navigate, like the LA Mall or the Bonaventure Hotel. Architecturally, it's one of those things that was definitely planned from the bird's eye view, with complicated little maquettes, rather than lived. But it also comes from a place of total idealism, seeing as the idea was that people would gather to witness light and music in concert every night. The Triforium was supposed to be the largest musical instrument in the world. I want to celebrate that vision. Because the Triforium never quite functioned, the project of preserving it is unique: we have the opportunity to reach back into the past with the tools of the future. It's like we're fixing an error in the timeline.



Photo by Kailee McGee

When thinking about your work, I see an element of celebration in all of it – an impulse to fondly share people and things you admire and love.

I like that. I've never thought about it in that way, but I think you're totally right. I'm going to start saying that. I've always been that way. Actually, my Dad just sent me a scan of this document that he found, from my childhood. It's a brochure I made for the city of Portland with all of my favorite spots to go. It's definitely the baby version of *5 Every Day*. It's about the Discovery Zone and my favorite bowling alley and stuff. It's very cute.

I've always loved discovering other people's deals. Other people are the most fascinating thing on Earth. I like to find out about people and try to understand them. I also like to be able to speak from a position of authority, and I think fandom is the most gentle form of authority. You get to dominate something in the sense that you know all about it, you're telling people about it, and they're listening to you. But fandom also comes from a place of reverence, and a desire to amplify someone else's work. It's a perfect vocation for me.

There's probably some connection to music there, too, because music is very much about others, especially for a band that plays live a lot. The people who care about the music care about it for their own reasons, and have their own narratives and understanding of what it is that the musicians are doing. And fans, whether or not they're right—whether or not we're as good as they think we are—that's their truth. So, I feel like making music is a lot about giving space to those people and celebrating them.

There's nothing more honorable than being a fan. I love to be a fan, and I love people who are fans. It can be such a sweet relationship. There are YACHT fans who are just so special, really great people. People who support a band, who go see a band every time they're in town, are so nice. I can barely go out when I'm home. When people make the effort; that's incredible.

What does being successful mean to you?

I guess just being happy. Right? Being able to sleep at night and not doing a job that's bad for the world. Having the feeling that what you do is a net positive is a blessing that not all people get to have, especially those who work for others, or for larger companies. Obviously having a roof over your head and the material comforts, but I've never aspired to great wealth or anything.

I just want to be safe and be happy and be able to provide for the people I care for if I need to. I want to have at least a couple of friends I can cook with. That's pretty much

success. And a community—whether it's an artistic community, a friend community, or a really good geographical community. Being part of a community and feeling like an active part of that community is basically personhood in my book.



Photo by Kailee McGee

Claire L. Evans recommends:

Seeding wildflowers if you have the dirt.

Julian Dibbell's *My Tiny Life*, my favorite book about the Internet.

Ursula K. Le Guin's *translation* of the *Tao Te Ching*, may she rest in peace.

Preserved lemons, *they couldn't be easier to make*.

Name

Claire L. Evans

Vocation

Writer, Musician

