

On making work independently



Comedian, writer, and director Dan Perlman (*Flatbush Misdemeanors*) discusses leaning into what you love to do, the myth of overnight success, and the ongoing challenge of a work/life balance.

March 5, 2025 -

As told to Taylor K. Shaw, 1582 words.

Tags: [Comedy](#), [Film](#), [Television](#), [Independence](#), [Beginnings](#), [Collaboration](#), [Success](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Process](#).

I get the impression that you don't let anything stop you from creating. Where does that drive come from?

I think part of it is that [standup] is what I've wanted to do for so long. It took a lot of years of working up the courage to do it.

When I was a kid I was super shy. I'd write jokes and hide them under my bed.

There's something really nice about finding something that you love putting the work into. It doesn't feel like labor or the labor is way more enjoyable. I'm always trying to follow the excitement of whatever thing (standup, animated project, short film) that I'm excited about. Even if only 50 people see it, that's something.

Did going from no-budget web series to having a budget for a broadcast show change your creative practice?

Not really. I guess the thing that changed was we had permits which I'd never had before. Before we were sneaking onto the subway and bribing a janitor to let us into a school. So it's definitely a change in that sense where it's like, "Oh, it's legal that we're filming here."

Flatbush only got to Showtime because we made it as a zero budget web series. So it had that proof of concept.

We still worked with the same comedians, filmed in Brooklyn, and kept it small and local. If you can create independently it helps.

It just shows you how to keep a producer's hat in mind. Then, when you're given a little more budget and they're like, "You need to rewrite this scene. It can't take place in a hospital" or whatever. You're like, "Okay, fine." And you just change it because you've dealt with those curveballs before.

Does finding funding get easier with success, or is it always starting over from zero?

It's always a challenge. I think it's easier to have the initial conversations with people because maybe they liked the show or they know that they're supposed to have liked the show.

The thing that gets easier is your confidence that you can get it done.

Especially for people who've made stuff independently—whether it's sketches or shorts or features, it's so hard

to make a thing. If you have the ability to do that and pull something together, the next one will be easier than the next one will be easier.

It's just that confidence and also finding those people at each stage where you're like, "Cool, you are my person and anything I'm fortunate to try to do again you're going to be the first person I ask."

Flatbush was one of Showtime's lowest-budget comedies, and they greenlit it because they saw what we could do independently.

Do you treat your art practice like a business? How did you figure out how to make a living through your creative work?

I'm very regimented. I have hours every day that I write. I am big with to-do lists and I make them the night before.

I teach undergrads at college once a week. I teach a grad school class once a week and that's also just helpful for making a living in between projects when stuff is in development, whether it's TV or feature.

Before that, when I was doing standup, I worked all these different temp jobs. I worked at a radio show. I tutored for years. I sold mattresses at a Costco. I was a proctor on law school exams, just sitting there on my phone. I had a million different gigs and then would go and bomb doing stand-up at night.

Finding that balance can be tricky. I think that's why it's so important to stay motivated by working on stuff that you actually like.

In the traditional Hollywood model, success is less about what you want to be making and more about how you can have the biggest career possible. Do you think that focusing on what you want to make is hard advice to follow?

A thing that's kind of overstated is when people say, I had an idea to write this thing but my manager said don't do that because people aren't looking for that right now. They're looking for the next *Ted Lasso*.

I always feel like that's silly advice because by the time you write the thing, they're not looking for the next *Ted Lasso* anymore. They're looking for the next *The Bear*, *Shōgun*, or whatever it is. It changes so quickly.

For so many people whose work we love. There's years in between. You look at directors we love and there's maybe years in between their first feature and their second feature. People who've won Oscars.

Something's happening in between. I totally get that nobody wants to come out and be like, "Boy, I was really doubting myself for a while." You just want to paint yourself like it's all smooth sailing.

There are certain people where they had a thing hit and the rocket ship pulled them up. For many of us, it's like a slog and you have good runs and you have times where you can't control the external.

Beyond money, what does it actually cost to be creative?

All through my 20s, I did stand-up every night. Multiple times a night. I didn't really take nights off. A lot of it was probably good and needed. A lot of it was not.

I've learned in an ongoing journey how to balance work and life.

That's why it's so important to find positive dynamics within work. So you're living a life and respecting other people's lives as well.

So it's like we all care about this thing but also you should have a weekend where you don't think about this. We'll be back Monday to get going again.

You seem to really enjoy working with people you know, whether it be someone you've known from high school or an interesting character that you've met along the way. Do you view collaboration as a valuable resource? How has collaboration contributed to you being able to make works?

If you're trying to write, direct, or create in any sort of form, it's nice to be able to decenter yourself or your own point of view and work with people you trust who might have different experiences.

I think it is so helpful to make things. Finding those people who you have this kind of shared language with I think is fun and makes the thing better.

Last question, fun question. You've auditioned for notable scripted series roles. Do you now identify as an actor?

I guess I don't identify as an actor but It's fun to act.

I've been fortunate to work with amazing actors and I see what they put into it. And that ain't me. But that's what I put into the other stuff like all of my writing in the margins of a billion different emotions.

I view myself as a comic more than an actor. As a comedian, you have a sense of your own voice and I know what jokes I can hit in my voice.

I think for a lot of roles I've been sent, like to read for *Yellow Jackets*, I'm like, I wouldn't cast me as that guy. Not in a million years. Just cast some handsome actor man.

Dan Perlman Recommends:

I made these two short films... *Cramming* (2020) and *Practice Space* (2024) in collaboration with the same two kids, non-actors. They were 11 & 12 when we shot *Cramming*; 15 & 16 when we shot *Practice Space*. I'm very proud of them and our work together and the films.

The Heartbreak Kid (1972). I just watched this a few months ago for the first time. Elaine May's such a good, funny filmmaker. Great jokes and Charles Grodin is so punchable in this role.

Rewind & Play (2022). A super interesting doc I saw recently. The filmmaker got access to all this unused raw archive material and outtakes from a 30-min French doc about Thelonious Monk from 1969. He re-edits and assembles this footage to tell a wildly different story that showcases the making of this original French doc, a story that shows the original French filmmakers manipulating and rejecting Monk's answers and agency in his replies to their questions. It's fun to think about how you could scratch the surface of a sterile, boring doc and - with the same footage - could dissect the emotion and actions in the making of it and reassemble it to something insightful and interesting and frustrating. Plus, Monk's music is good.

Framing things. I'll print these glossy stills for 40 cents each at CVS Photos, then place 'em in frames and mount them on my walls. I've never done much decorating, but I've found it to be a fun hobby. It's fun to think about how to curate the images - finding little meanings in why certain ones are arranged together, making themes and threads and altering them sometimes. It's a range of images from film to music to comedy to random things that speak to me in one way or another.

My cat, Crim. My IG story highlights are mostly photos of Crim, so if you want to see a cute tuxedo cat who will never do anything wrong, [@danjperlman](#).

Name

Dan Perlman

Vocation

comedian, writer, and director

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