

# On balancing the line between your self-expression and your audience



DJ, producer, and festival founder Daniel Martin-McCormick (Relaxer) discusses knowing what you want to say and holding onto it during uncertain moments.

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As told to Michelle Hyun Kim, 2664 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Money](#), [Day jobs](#), [Beginnings](#), [Identity](#).

**You started in the punk scene as a teenager in DC, and now you make electronic music and put on events here in New York City. What do you think are similarities between punk and electronic music – either musically or emotionally or things about the scenes themselves?**

A DIY scene is a DIY scene, period. A lot of people came from punk to electronic music, because it was a very permissive space. Punk was where you could just start a band, you could throw yourself into it. People were hanging out a lot and creating and egging each other on and then taking the leap. But bands are often impractical and fraught and implode before their time. Or, the drummer goes to college and you can't find another person. There was that constant logistical frustration, and I thought, "I can just move into this other realm, one where I can continue to push and explore sounds, and it's exciting." Some of my early exposures to electronic music, the sound system and the all-nightness of it, the sense of collective energy was really exciting. The fact that music could happen over a longer period of time, rather than three or four discreet 20 to 40-minute sets – the idea that a two-hour set was on the shorter side – was crazy to me. The sense of expansion was really appealing.

When I moved to New York, the parties that were happening here in 2010 and 2011 – especially [Mutual Dreaming](#) parties, which I later became involved in – really blew my mind. That was the first time I went to a warehouse and went all night, and my friends had organized it and were playing. It made this energy field, where we all clicked together and came into focus. Prior to that, it was so much imagining of a better world, imagining parties that happened in the '90s that you would read about. But a renaissance was happening in New York at that time, with the introduction of outsider house and footwork. A couple new clubs opened and there was a new interest in dance music in America overall. It felt like a moment where all these dreams started to come to life.

**Was there ever a moment where you felt like, "OK, my career in music is actually sustainable, and I could do this for the rest of my life," or is that still pending?**

When I was 14 years old, I went to Tower Records after school and opened a display copy of the book *Get in the Van* by [Henry Rollins](#) – it's a tour diary from when he was in Black Flag. In this book, he was talking about growing up in Washington DC, which is where I'm from, and working in Georgetown, which is the neighborhood I'd pass through on my way home from school. He was like, "We got in a van, not in a bus, not on a plane, and we drove from show to show, and we organized these shows. They weren't big stadium shows, they were in clubs or bars or warehouses or houses."

When I was 14, I had no concept that music was something people did because every musician I'd ever seen was on

TV and was a giant superstar like Metallica or Janet Jackson. But then I realized, "Oh, this person is from my town and he joined a band where they did it themselves," and that blew my mind. I announced that night [to my parents] that I was going to be a musician – it was clear what I was going to do with the rest of my life and I've felt that way ever since. I don't even know if a career in music is sustainable. I hardly make any money off my music, but it would be the greatest loss to just say, "Well, I'm not going to do this anymore."

What I wanted in that moment is the same thing I still want now, which is to make music and to express and to connect and be in a community and perform and let it out. And what I still admire about [Black Flag] is that they found ways to do that even when it was not sustainable or welcome.

I don't think of it like, "I make my living from music, and if gigs ever dry up, then I'll do something else." I've oriented my entire life around music, so if I'm working a job, there has to be time afterwards where I can work on music. Except for one year of my life [in 2012], I've never survived off of music. I had one year where shows and tours paid for everything, and I was pretty broke. But yeah, it's my greatest joy playing music. I'm going to go work on it as soon as we're done with this call.

**What makes a really great night out, or nightlife experience, to you?**

A lot of it feels related to having a personal connection or investment. I've been to amazing parties where the music is by somebody I don't know personally, but they were really special because there was an energy, you're part of the scene, and something is coalescing. I could say "good sound," but I've seen amazing nights with bogus sound.

I think [the experience is really great] if there's an energy where the audience is ready to receive an artist and the artist is ready to speak, or if the artist is pushing through and they can transcend the opposition. There are these heroic stories where a DJ or musician cleared the room, but it was really memorable for the people who stayed, or like The Rite of Spring, half the audience is booing and half are cheering. You have those moments where something radical is happening and not everyone is on board, that can be really special too.

DJing can often incentivize crowd-pleasing. So as an artist, you do have to hold on to something in your core that's beyond crowd-pleasing, and [figuring out what it is] can be a little mysterious. It's not something you can put in words like, "Well, I don't do that, and I only do this." There's no one way to be artistically true to yourself, but you just have to hold onto that thing so that you can be articulating it into the space, otherwise it just can become really blurry and you start crowd-pleasing.

**As a DJ, do you think about the balance between, "I'm going to play what I want to play," versus, "I am reading the room and think this is the energy that people want." Or maybe the crowd needs to be pushed more, or it needs a chill-out moment, how much do you consider those things?**

I think about what I want to do, and if it's going to translate [to the audience]. In this interview, I could go on a crazy rant and start saying what I want to say, but is that going to be meaningful? We're here to have a conversation. So with DJing, I'll usually have some tracks ready where I'm like, "these are the super crazy ones," and if we can really get there, then I'll play them. But I would call that the outer point and hope that we can stretch to that point. I don't want to play them unless I feel like we've gotten there.

I think about creating an energy field. Especially on longer sets, you have to navigate it as it comes, instead of as you think it should be. There's this feeling of discovering where the music wants to go along with you. Like, "this is the music that I have, and I have a sense of how I might want to play it," but I do want to maintain a sense of presence and interest. I don't want to move through a playlist. And sometimes that means I don't want to get the stretch that I wanted – which might be playing a noise or metalcore song – but it all has to get to a special place to be able to unleash that.

**For Dripping, you often book these interesting performance artists. Why is it important to fold them into the DJ sets and live musical performances?**

I think it brings a dimension to the experience of the human body, and sometimes humor and confrontation that's really welcome. For both Baby Leo and myself, we curate the festival together, and Sol and I do the Nowadays nights – we all have interests in a lot of different art forms. I think that electronic music suggests total freedom in terms of the sounds you can draw on, and you have a lot of control over how you might want to DJ, you have these amazing sound systems, you have time – yet you can often experience something pretty homogeneous. Avant-garde music also suggests something very radical, and experimental music can suggest a new world is possible, but often they're presented in a way that can be very sterile. Sometimes you'll go to the sound art event and it's on a terrible sound system in a gallery, and no one knows what they're doing – even if the art itself has merit. So we're bringing these more avant-garde genres into a space where you have all the fun and joy and infrastructure of a rave. We're like, "Let's make it as visceral as possible."

**For your new release *Break*, did you change anything about your production or writing process?**

Definitely. In 2022, my friends who run a party called Headznite asked me to do a drum 'n' bass live set. I was daunted but into the idea, because I like the genre, but I didn't have any experience making it. I was experimenting with it here and there, but it just felt like this whole drum science. But they gave me the prompt, and I said to myself, "Alright, I've got a deadline, I've got a very specific party, I'm going to try it." I was visiting my partner who at the time was living in Australia, and I brought all my gear with me, but then I forgot to bring my voltage converter, so my sampler was the only thing I could plug in. I decided that I was only going to use the sampler and certain BPMs, and I had a month [to work out the set] – and that was a completely refreshing experience. After that, I just never went back. I've been playing [drum 'n' bass] since developing that live set, and started making new material in those tempos.

When I first heard techno, I really admired its minimalism. But when I heard Brian Pineyro, who is DJ Python, when he was doing a jungle project at Bossa as DJ Xanax, I realized, "This is music that's so tied to the body." Techno feels like this elliptical post-human atmospheric thing, but jungle music is so raw and rooted in the body. There's something about acknowledging the human experience in this breaky syncopated music. What I heard in jungle reminded me of punk and dub, which is that music is a whole-body sensation.

It clicked. I thought, "I think I need to be on Earth, I don't think I'm calibrated to be this disembodied, trippy being." So it was cool to have the prompt that stopped me from continuing on whatever I was working on and be like, "No, you have to kind of actually unpack this a bit." That gave me a starting place to start synthesizing that overtly.

**Since you've been in the New York scene for a while, do you see yourself as a mentor? What would you tell others who want to get involved?**

I try to be as helpful as possible for people to achieve their goals and get where they're going, especially when I teach [at Brooklyn College]. But I don't go into the club and say, "The mentor is here." I'm always learning, and I'm pretty amazed at what people are making who have come before and who've come after and are also my peer group. There's some incredible artists in New York right now: I really admire the SLINK crew and K Wata, DJ Temporary, the 29 Speedway crew. There's lots of amazing DJs and a whole generation of incredible live performers and free jazz people. So I'm trying to just stay engaged and push myself as an artist. If there's anything I can offer to people, I'm happy to share it, but I don't feel that I'm in some rarefied position.

When I was in my late 20s and I started DJing, I remember seeing lots of rants on Facebook from older DJs about young DJs and vinyl, digital media. They were like, "young DJs these days don't know the history." And I was like, "Well, fuck you. I have my experience I'm trying to share." When I see younger DJs now, I think they're rightfully defiant because they're trying to express themselves, and there are people who are trying to say, "You should consider my feelings before you express yourself." And it's like, no, absolutely not. I don't think that that's very helpful.

When people ask me my opinion on how to start in music, it's usually just make friends and be true to yourself and fuck everybody else. There's no secret of how to be an artist other than just really saying you are and going for it.

**Daniel Martin-McCormick recommends:**

Arvo Pärt - *Arbos*. An incredible collection of shorter works by Pärt, performed by the out-of-this-world Hilliard vocal ensemble. I first heard them on a recording of Machaut I picked up on Christmas night, 2005, two weeks before I left DC and moved to San Francisco, and their voices always take me back to that pocket of wintery calm. This record has a very cool and strange reprise of the title piece - I think it's a second recording, but it's functionally identical. An odd choice that works very well. Although these pieces were written separately, it plays like a fully integrated suite. Literally every track on here has taken turns as my fav-to-the-grave pick.

Kryptic Minds. Rightly revered, perfect moody dubstep/UK soundsystem music. I have nothing original to say about KM's discography. When it hits, there's just this feeling of awe. Such an amazing balance of unshowy sonic impact and succinct, elegant atmospherics. The confidence is blinding.

Barry Lyndon. I watched this movie with the lowest of expectations and it completely blew my mind. All the discussion I had heard around it revolved around two aspects of the film: first, the obsessive use of natural light and candlelight, which required NASA-grade lenses developed for documenting outer space. Second, people described the titular character as blank, featureless, or intentionally boring. So I expected an emotionless exercise in formal perfection, but it turned out to be a hilarious and incisive black comedy that may be Kubrick's best work. Seriously underrated.

Joy Guidry. Bassoonist Joy Guidry is one of the most exciting and visceral new voices in jazz-adjacent composition. Her work can be raw, funny, spiritual and is always very very real. If you've been Nala Sinephropilled or are vibing on Irreversible Entanglements, do yourself a favor and check out Guidry's exceptional music. She's on her own tip - I've heard moments that remind me of the work of Terre Thaemlitz, others that feel more in line with Roscoe Mitchell. An outstanding performer and visionary voice.

Pupusas Ridgewood. I am fortunate to live within walking distance of this culinary gem. If you're in the neighborhood, it's worth a detour for sure. Try the hongo.

Name

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Vocation

producer, DJ, singer-songwriter, event producer, label owner

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