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As told to Grayson Haver Currin, 2030 words.

Tags: Music, Collaboration, Independence, Multi-tasking, Time management, Focus.



# On how to stay balanced and sharp when you're too busy

**An interview with guitarist Mary Halvorson on the merits of being self-motivated, being sensitive to your mood, and how to stay focused. You've always seemed so self-motivated—always collaborating in new guises and trying new approaches as a composer and player. You've received many accolades and worked with so many of your heroes in recent years. How do you continue to stay motivated to keep improving?**

It's never been an issue for me. I am extremely self-motivated, and I have been since grade school. I never felt like I had more natural talent than anybody else, so I did feel like I always had to work hard. And when I worked hard, I would do well. There's never been any kind of risk of me becoming complacent. It's just in my personality. I'll over-work on things, but I don't think I'm self-critical to a crippling degree. But I'm always noticing things I want to improve upon, and I'm always feeling unprepared, even if I've prepared a ton.

**Do you find it's hard to work with people who are not that way? Or who are too much that way? What's the perfect ratio in a collaborator?**

I've always enjoyed working with people who are prepared and who take things seriously. If I'm going to have somebody in my band, I want people who are going to be enthusiastic, to be on top of it, to look at the music, to be organized. If there're three amazing musicians and I'm trying to decide between them, the one who's on top of it, organized, and enthusiastic is going to win. As I've gotten older, my tolerance for bullshit has gone down. People showing up an hour late for a rehearsal is just not worth it for me, no matter how good that musician is.

**What does practice consist of for you?**

If I sit down to practice or to compose, those are very separate activities. With practicing, I'll have some kind of larger goal, something I want to get better at. I'll try to identify what I feel are holes in my playing and try to hone in on them. I might work on it every day for a year. Right now, I'm working on chord voicings, so I'll spend a lot of time painstakingly going through voicings for different chords and trying to expand my knowledge and understanding of harmony. I'll usually be simultaneously working on music for whatever I have coming up.

**How much do you practice now on a regular basis?**

The way my life is, I have very little routine. But I will try to practice every day, anywhere from half an hour to four hours, just depending on how much time I have. If I could have at least two hours a day to be working on music, I'd feel pretty good, especially if I have an occasional day where I could spend the whole day. When I start cutting down on stuff is when I realize I've gotten so busy that I don't have time to practice and work on fundamentals. If I feel I'm too busy for that, that's a problem.

**Has it gotten easier to say "no" to things when you realize that's happening?**

It has. Partly because often I'll have to say "no" to things I do want to do, which I understand is a fortunate position. I have always struggled to say "no." I've gotten better at that out of necessity, because I get completely burnt out and go kind of crazy.

**In recent years, you've started to lead bands and projects more often, but you've also remained active playing solo and in other people's projects. As a bandleader, how do you balance listening to what the people you've recruited are doing in real time versus making sure that you're still playing your best, too?**

You always have to think about doing both simultaneously. It's often more challenging as a bandleader to be very present in the music and try to not worry so much about all the little things. Let's say you're in an improvised section, and you have to somehow get back to the written section. When you're a bandleader, you might be concerned about, "How is this going to happen?" and "Do I need to cue this thing back in?" I try to let go, let the music happen, not try to control things so much, trust the other musicians, and trust that things are going to happen in their own time. If I can get into that headspace, it makes it

much easier to listen, to be in the moment, and to enjoy myself.

**On stage, or in a session, do you ever struggle with the worries of day-to-day minutiae, since you're so busy?**

I'm pretty good at stepping away from daily distractions. There're always things that could distract me—maybe somebody's talking really loudly in the audience right in front of me. But no matter how good or bad I'm feeling, I try to be in the moment. Where it changes is that I'm sensitive to little differences in how I'm feeling every day. Sometimes I'll sit down and pick up the guitar, and I feel great. I have tons of ideas. I can play anything. Other days, I might pick up the guitar, and my fingers aren't moving. I'm flubbing notes. I have no ideas. Those kinds of differences are way more extreme to me than they might seem to you. If you were listening to me practice on those two days, you might not notice. But I really feel those differences. A lot of us do.

**You mentioned the loud talker in the front row: What method have you found for those sorts of annoyances?**

If I'm struggling for whatever reason—maybe the room sounds bad, I feel like everybody hates it, or the audience has no energy—I just try to trust that an audience has come to see me play and it's coming across better than I feel it is. Sometimes that takes a lot of strength. It's just practice, having had a bunch of nights and understanding that some nights are going to be harder than others. The reason why I practice regularly is because I'm trying to improve that base level, so that when I feel I'm at my worst, I can slowly raise that.

With a band, if you're not feeling super inspired, the chances are that somebody else in the band is. There are days where you just feel like, "Oh, that person was on fire"—like the basketball player that scores 50 points. You can tell when people are just on a tear. If somebody else in the band is on a tear, you can draw inspiration from that. It will lift you up.

**When you have a bad day, how do you work around it?**

If I have the luxury of not fighting it, then I won't fight it. Let's say it's a week when I have a lot of time at home, and maybe I want to be practicing and composing. If I sit down at the guitar and I'm not feeling particularly inspired, I'm probably going to work on nuts-and-bolts stuff, or run scales. Maybe the next day, if I'm feeling super inspired, I'll try to compose something. For the most part, I actually embrace those little differences in how I feel. I swim laps at the pool for exercise. I time my swims. Some days I swim way faster, and I don't know why. I notice it, even on a day-to-day basis. It's the same thing with playing guitar.

**Do those bad days ever produce good results?**

I have memories of composing, being in a horrible mood, writing something, and thinking, "This is terrible." Then I came back to it, maybe the next day or maybe a couple of weeks later, and thought, "Oh, actually, I kind of like this!" I've had that experience enough where I make sure to never throw out compositions. I used to throw them out if I didn't like them. I really don't throw things out now. Let's say I'm trying to write a piece and I write a phrase and don't like it, I might delete that. But if I've taken the time to write a whole composition, or most of a composition, I'll keep it. Usually I write something and work through it until I like it. In the rare instance that I finish something and decide I don't like it, I will go back to it at some point and try to salvage something, even if I just take one little piece of it and use that as a starting point.

**Speaking of returning to things, you've said before that you didn't really take to jazz initially, that it didn't resonate. But you stuck with it, and it's become your life's work. Do you still have that mentality of not dismissing things at first glance?**

That's something that's always been really important to me—remaining open. I try not to judge things based on genre, so I'm open to checking out anything. I believe there's great stuff and terrible stuff in every genre, so it's a matter of remaining open. Having taught college students a little bit in my life, I feel like there's this particular age when people are forming their identities. At that point, you get into a lot of, "Only this little tiny corner of music that I'm a part of is awesome, and everything else sucks!" You see this ego-forming stuff starting to happen. I understand that people need to go through it, but I'm always hoping that when they do that, they'll get over it at some point. I went through it a little, where I would make judgments about a certain type of music. I grew out of it; now I genuinely love a lot of different stuff.

I'm an Elliott Smith fanatic, and I did not love Elliott Smith when I first heard him. I was completely indifferent to it, like, "Oh, this is fine," for maybe a year. Nothing about it drew me in. I had a friend who was like, "No, no, it's amazing—check out this, this, and this." I really started listening, and I became obsessed maybe five or six years ago.

**You do so many things and play with so many people. What do you do about sheer exhaustion?**

I'll binge sleep—get, like, a 12-hour night of sleep. If I don't have anything on a particular day, I'll let myself do that. People always say you can't store up on sleep, but having a day like that will energize me. I try to not make appointments in the morning and I try to sleep as much as I possibly can. When I sleep enough, I'm just more productive, more active. I can get so much more done if I take the time

to get a good night's sleep.

The other thing I do, which is weird for a freelance musician, is I differentiate between Mondays through Fridays and weekends. I don't think I've talked to too many people about this strategy; it's largely in my head. Sometimes, I'm on tour, so it's not a strict thing. But when I'm home I will try to do that. Mentally, it's much harder for me to be like, "I'm going to take Tuesday and Wednesday this week."

Maybe that's a product of being in school, going to college, and having a day job for many years when I moved to New York. When I stopped working at an office, I kept that. I'll let myself relax a little bit more on Saturdays and Sundays. I still work on Saturdays and Sundays, but it feels like less pressure. It's really easy as a freelancer to suddenly be working seven days a week, 80 hours a week, especially when you love what you do.

Mary Halvorson recommends:

A Little Life by Hanya Yanagihara

Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

The Triggering Town by Richard Hugo

Bluets by Maggie Nelson

The Mandibles: A Family, 2029-2047 by Lionel Shriver

Name

Mary Halvorson

Vocation

Musician

Fact



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