

On learning to embrace your successes



Musicians Meg Duffy and Jenn Wasner on different kinds of collaboration, creating art in solitude, identifying and owning your power, resiliency, gratitude, putting in the work, and the importance of freedom.

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 6185 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Collaboration](#), [Process](#), [Mental health](#), [Inspiration](#), [Identity](#), [Focus](#), [Independence](#).

Jenn, in the [statement](#) for Wye Oak's [collaboration with the Brooklyn Youth Chorus](#), you talk about how language is bigger than the power to try to control it. This got me thinking about the idea of making art in this time—when there are so many attempts to control language and daily life and news and postal systems. How do you maintain focus on your work right now?

Jenn Wasner: Attention to detail with words in the context of working on my art practice or my creative practice is the way that I distill and figure out how I feel about things. I have a tendency to get easily overwhelmed when I'm trying to process and articulate an opinion about a sensitive subject; I'm hyper aware of nuance and I'm hyper critical of myself in a way that forces me to interrogate my own thoughts constantly. It can get exhausting because I believe in the power of critical thought and not taking things for granted, and pushing yourself to uncover deeper truths about the things that you believe and where they came from and how you came to believe them. That process—especially when the intake of information is so overwhelming—can be almost paralyzing for me. So, I find that working on something like a song or a poem or anything that has barriers around it, and a rigid set of rules, is useful. When I move that process into the creative process, it's a limitation that allows me to feel less overwhelmed and to work through my feelings in a way that makes sense to me. I feel like that's one of the reasons why I'm drawn to the use of language in songs, placing lyrics within a structure and form.

It's also one of the reasons why I'm so uncomfortable and feel like I'm a bumbling idiot when I'm trying to have these kinds of conversations in other spaces, like on social media. It's always been very clear to me that music is the medium I want to use to communicate with the world. It's the way I feel comfortable communicating. But now, if you do this thing, you're also expected to articulate yourself in a million other ways in form and spaces. That's where I start to feel like I'm not in my comfort zone. So for me, the focus isn't something I have to really work at because it's like a bonafide necessity for me to figure out how to function and what I think like on a daily basis.

Meg, you've been productive during quarantine on your own music and collaborating with other people. Is it a different process when you're working on your own music versus playing guitar for Jenn (in Flock of Dimes) or in [Perfume Genius](#) or [Sylvan Esso](#), or whomever?

Meg Duffy: They're really different. I have been really productive to some standards. When I'm productive in terms of being active in whatever music community it is that I'm throwing myself into, or experiencing at the time, it's funny the level of brain chemicals and... validation I get. I guess it's tied up with validation because music is where I spend most of my energy and being creative.

But, for example, working with you, Jenn, seeing you be excited about a song and through that lens, reacting to something that I'm contributing to is very, very stimulating for me, because it reminds me of the creative voice that I do have in a very different context. Because I don't write songs the way you write songs or Mike Perfume Genius writes songs or Kevin Morby, but I know that I'm hearing music in a different way. I'm able to hear what I add to a song in a different way, and it's a good practice of what I would do if I were left by myself.

With the Zoom recordings Jenn and I did with Sylvan Esso [for *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*], we were all recording separately on our own, and nobody was really directing me or giving me any feedback. This is tied to language, too: I feel overwhelmed by options so much in my life, because there's so many different ways to say one thing, and you only can ever really choose one in that moment. So, with other people's music, I feel like I really, really thrive on getting direction and feedback. When we're collaborating, we're connecting, right? When we're in a room together and making music, it's a form of connection that is nonverbal, which is cool, but it's still language. I feel really activated by that.

When it's my own music, I have control over so much more than I do when I'm just playing guitar or singing in a band. I'm in control of the whole thing, like playing god or whatever. And then, giving up that control to someone else to be in charge of the way that it transforms in some way or gets added to... the forms of connection and collaboration that exists between the two of them are so different.

Recently I've been working on writing my own songs and I've been demoing at home. And I realized that I actually sometimes struggle with playing guitar on my own songs because nobody else is there being like, "Yes, like that, follow that." And I'm just out here with the whole alphabet and that's a challenge. It's also different because contributing to other people's music, once I play the part, it's beyond me. I don't have to make the statement on your Instagram what it means to me. I don't have to tell anybody, I don't have to interpret it. I can talk about what my experience was in the time, but then it becomes a memory.

It quickly becomes the past. Whereas, with my own records and my songs, that continues—you're constantly getting different waves of feedback, validation, having to explain yourself... You also have to rewrite history in a way, where if you don't feel connected to a certain song that you put out after you wrote it, you're still having a constant engagement with it.

So they're different, but they're so mutually beneficial.

Jenn: Listening to you talk about it, I'm realizing that it's never really occurred to me, but you and I both have a lot in common and that we work with a lot of other people, and also make our own music largely sort of in isolation. It's interesting because it is really difficult when you're used to having that collaborative communication with others, to suddenly have to remember how to be the person that makes all the choices in a vacuum of how overwhelming and intimidating that can be.

But I'm also curious, I feel like I've gotten better at that particular skill set with my own music based on the work that I've done with others. If you're doing it and you're removing the ego from it in service of someone else's vision, you flex that muscle of being in service to a thing that has nothing to do with you and your thoughts, and feelings, and emotions.

Meg: And your identity.

Jenn: It's such an interesting thing to be basically producing your own songs in real time, which is what we both do. You're writing the song, but you're also arranging and thinking about how songs are supposed to work and how the parts will go, and often playing a lot of the parts. I feel like I've gotten better at that skillset of learning how to turn on and off the ego—the emotional part of my brain—when I need to, and then accessing it when I need to...

Meg: It's information gathering, right? Because working with you in the studio is very different from working with Kevin Morby, or whoever it is. I said "yes" to doing this Perfume Genius thing before the world went into lockdown. I thought I was going to be on tour and learning new songs. You know what that's like to sacrifice your

own career, or put your own career on hold, even though you're not because you're still playing music in the world. Like not giving attention to Wye Oak and, and doing a different tour for a year. But it's information. It's like reading a book, you're gathering information.

In the last two weeks, after rehearsing with Perfume Genius and working in the studio with you, I feel really activated. I have all this new inspiration. It gives you confidence, and it gives you perspective, and it shows you how other people do things, which is so cool, too. You also see someone's confidence in a situation. You can be like, "Okay, this person in this situation is very definitive." And I'm like, "Cool, I can do that too, I guess."

Jenn: That was what was so funny about making this [Flock of Dimes] record. So much of my life has been writing in solitude and then taking it to one other person. It's not all of my experience, but up until the past few years, it has been a lot of my experience. And it's so crazy because I think a lot of times the skillset I take for granted as something that it's just part of it—I don't even think of it as being what it is—but being in the studio with you and Bella [Blasko] and then Bella and I had late night drinks one night and she was like, "You're such a great producer." And I was like, "What are you talking about? I'm just coming up with how these songs go and giving people my opinions on the parts they're playing."

Meg: That's producing.

Jenn: She was like, "Well, yeah." And I realized she was totally right. I know that clearly in regards to other people, and being able to recognize when other people are doing that work, but when I do it since I'm just so used to having my hands in everything, I don't give myself the same credit that I'm able to give others for doing the same job.

Meg: Right, that's not the name that you've given it.

Jenn: In my head I'm like, "These are the steps that you take when you want to make something." But it is a thing, it's very much a skillset.

Meg: We don't have to get into the misogyny aspect of all that...

Jenn: We can. We definitely can. I'm currently going through something that I am thinking of in my mind as "rage week." I'm feeling like it might turn into rage month or possibly even rage year. A lot of it has to do with what you're talking about, where I'm just sort of waking up to the truest extent of how I've been socialized to prioritize the feelings and experiences of others deeply, and really looking at exactly what that has taken from me. A lot of that processing is happening on a personal level, but it exists in the creative world, too. Like you were saying of the inability to give myself credit or trust my own instincts or be able to have the innate, inherent confidence to say "I like this. I like to listen into or take credit for the things that I do." So yeah, it's a topic that's been very much on my mind because hashtag rage week.

Meg: Rage week and also just the context of power. Something I think a lot about is the difference between owning your power, naming your power, and living in your power, because those are three different things.

Jenn: What are they? I would love to hear what they are.

Meg: Owning your power is the way that you tell the narrative in your head, right? That tells you, "I am a producer, I am a successful musician," whatever it is that you are afraid to own because of the shame around success, which is a weird thing because in a capitalistic world like we're all like, "Oh, I don't want to be a successful person because then I'm a capitalist because success is quantified by money or experience or whatever it is." So it's all really complex. I'm not saying I have the answers to these three things. These are just things that I think about.

So, owning your power and naming it. You actually are a producer, I've seen you produce music. That's something

as an outsider I've seen you do, and you are good at it. Really just being able to identify it is what I mean by naming it. And then living it is so different from all of that, because in reality, in the real world, you do live those things, and your experience and living in action are completely different and irrelevant to naming or identifying or owning them.

Jenn: I feel like I'm probably a lot better at living than I am at naming or owning. My living has been second nature in some ways, because it's what I love to do so it's what I'm drawn to. I've naturally put most of my time and energy into that, but the naming it and the owning...You're absolutely right about the sort of fear of success, but for me, something I think about is what the definition of success even is, right?

I try really hard to live morally by the principles that I have, but it's also very hard to accept sometimes that it's impossible to live in an imperfect, morally corrupt world and not compromise your ideals in some way. It's just an impossibility. You have to exist within the structure of the world that you live in, which is just a painful thing inherently to learn how to hold and accept, and live and do your best within. But yeah, I feel like even with music, the idea of what is success? Because the idea of what success means has been handed down to us through a capitalist system being: Success is money. Success is visibility.

I feel like I hit a point in my career, honestly at the pinnacle of when Wye Oak was having a moment and we were at the peak of the buzz and the visibility, and I was miserable. I felt completely distanced and alienated from the reasons that I started making music in the first place. I remember asking myself the question of like, "Okay, you get to decide right now, what are you doing this for? Who and what and why? And if the goal is to march on down the path of bigger, better, more, then let that be the goal. And if the goal is to try and recover some of your lost joy, then you're doing this wrong."

So that's something that I feel like I've made a real effort to hold on to ever since then. With every decision that I make, just being like, "What would success look like in this scenario?" And for me, it's freedom. It's the freedom to grow, and evolve, and change, and not be reduced down to a caricature of a person. Honestly, in a lot of ways, I feel fortunate because I'm in this sweet spot that I've been searching for of having enough visibility and resources to be able to make the records that I want to make and to be able to pay the people that I want to pay to play with me, and to play shows and to put out records. But not so much that my life becomes so over complicated that I've completely lost hold of my own joy about the whole thing. Freedom is huge.

Meg: I think about the freedom thing a lot too, and the freedom to change. I've been thinking about this idea of releasing a song that I no longer believe in. I wouldn't necessarily release something that I don't believe in, but I'm saying; my thoughts do change because I'm a person who changes all the time, and I'm okay with that. You shouldn't be tethered to your past selves. We're human and we change.

I feel like we've both observed other people who are very successful—by playing in their bands or being in close proximity to them—and how much the narrative starts to get on the hamster wheel and spin around. I wouldn't want that. I don't want to be deprived of my humanity. I don't ever want to sacrifice gratitude for success; I think that's slippery and dangerous because you stop thinking about those moments of why you're doing it and who you're doing it for. Gratitude is a word that gets thrown around all the time. Or people are just like, "gratitude, vulnerability, compassion." But, everybody says those things because they are actually real and important. I want to believe that being successful can incorporate those principles. And also I want to be able to be happy, feeling like what I have is enough.

The hamster wheel is very real. Do you get exhausted of your own work in this kind of content churn? How do you navigate that?

Jenn: I've been thinking about this so much lately because the record that I'm just putting my finishing touches on is very much a heartbreak record. And I realized today as I was sending it off to mastering and I was just like, I'm not heartbroken anymore. It's been sort of my defining reality for the past five months. And I'm just like, oh, whoa. I wouldn't say that that's a big part of what my experience is at this moment. And then when this record comes out in eight more months, I mean, it's just so crazy to think that I am going to be putting this record out into a world and offering it up.

It's already such a dated representation of my emotional reality. I don't think it'll happen, but let's make the assumption that we're playing shows again in eight months. Then I'm going to go out and I'm going to stand on stage and I'm going to sing the songs of an emotional reality that is long since extinct. That's something that I've never really been able to completely make peace with. It's been one of the defining struggles for me, because I'm not someone I would consider to be a natural performer. I think some people find the act of performing itself inherently enjoyable and rewarding. For me what's enjoyable about it is delivering something that I actually feel connected to, and not that I'm pretending or acting like I feel connected to. So for me, how relevant it is, my distance in space and time from it is actually a really important part of what makes me enjoy the experience of performing it.

But the way that things are set up, and always have been set up inherently, it's impossible to only perform or only deliver when you're actually in the present space. I've figured out how to embrace it, or I think of it as like, "Well, this is a job that I'm doing and it might feel bad, but it's for other people. It's not for me in this moment." That makes it feel a little bit less selfish and I can kind of take myself out of it, but I've never really been able to completely make peace with how that works. It remains an open question for me. It feels bad to deliver things I no longer feel resonate with where I'm at emotionally. There's something off about it for me. I'm not that kind of performer, I guess.

Meg: You can't put on the heartbreak outfit. I think about this a lot in terms of like, I don't read my own journal. I don't go back and read a journal from last year because that's one of the most mortifying things I can actually think of, especially in the height of heartbreak or whatever.

I can really feel feelings fully and go deep, as most artists can go very deep into the feeling of whatever it is they're feeling, and I can very much go into the I'm in the sub layer of feeling that. Thank god, or whoever, for having the creative outlet that I can put that into because a lot of people don't. I really empathize with them.

I've been thinking about this, too. Some people are songwriters who write songs about the experiences that aren't their own, but if you're a songwriter or an artist or whatever, you're making work that's autobiographical or experiential, it needs to feel honest. I learned so much about myself listening to people talk about my music when I put out Placeholder. People were like, "There's a lot of anxiety, and there's a lot of working things out in this music." And I was like, "I guess, I don't know." I never really identified as an anxious person, which I don't because I think I have music to put it into.

I've been thinking a lot about how you can really see your own pattern and zoom out if you look at your own work. I've been in this process of healing some behavioral patterns that I'm trying to change and diving really into examining myself, and I'm being asked to journal and then read it back. And it's more of a day-to-day, sometimes hour-to-hour version of seeing what it is I'm feeling and then seeing how those feelings change. When you make work for a long time, and then you have a body of work to look back upon, you can really see how some things are cyclical.

That's really scary because, like you're saying, right now, you're not heartbroken anymore. You could be on stage eight months from now—and I mean, I hope you're not heartbroken again, and I hope that we are all on stage—and you could be singing these songs you feel even more distance from. In that situation do you lose the anchor or whatever it is you're expressing? When it comes to talking about feelings that encompass a whole record like that, when there's a theme, I think learning from it and being like, "Okay, this is something that comes up for me a lot," and just sitting with it and not judging it.

The thing that's so cool about music too, is that maybe like you're saying, the selflessness aspect of it is that a lot of people in the audience will associate whatever it is to your singing and saying with their own experience. And it's a cool way of letting something go and giving it up to god or whatever. You give it up to the other person and you let it go, and you can really move through a lot of emotions, like you're saying as well, processing through your music. So much of art in general is for that.

Jenn: That's been clearer to me in the process of making music in the past six months. Not that I haven't been deeply, deeply, emotionally connected to the things that I've been making before this, but this was just an

unprecedented really bad time for me, next level, fucking terrible, total reckoning on a number of levels. As corny as it sounds, it really did feel like life or death.

And it worked. I was making it when I was at one of the lowest points. And it was one of the only times during that period that I felt even remotely myself or in control of my destiny or connected to some kind of feeling that wasn't just pain. It's really important for me to remember that—that no one can take that from me. It is an ability and a process that I have access to to help me navigate whatever happens to me in my life and I'm so grateful for it. And, also, the way that I was using and relying on and leaning into the music of others in that moment reinforces the second half of the purpose of it for me, which is that I know that it can provide a similar outlet for other people.

I know that having your heart broken is one of the most universal experiences in the book. I liked the idea that something that I've gone through can be of service to someone else going through something similar. But it wasn't happening in the abstract, it was happening very much in the moment, and that's why people have asked me how I feel about the record and I'm like I'm really proud of it, but I'm also deeply embarrassed. It's so embarrassing because it is like reading your fucking journal from six months ago, and it's so embarrassing.

Do you think quarantine, and being removed from other people, allowed you to go deeper into the subject matter? In a way, it could maybe allow you to be less self-conscious about it?

Jenn: The experience of going through a COVID breakup is so potent. It wasn't just the breakup, it was also having every other part of my life that I used as a sense of support, and security, and distraction also removed from me. Every part of my life that I had relied upon as an outlet in the past was gone. So it was really just, "This is it. This is what I have. This is the coping mechanism that I have available to me. This and nothing else. This and binge eating popcorn at two in the morning are the only things I have available right now." It made it a more urgent feeling, for sure.

Meg: It was all encompassing.

Jenn: Yeah, my little world, my little house, and my little studio it was just that was it. That was all I had. It's so interesting to now be on the other side of it where I feel deeply grateful for it, in that I've been reminded of all the things in my life that I have, and that are these deep wells of joy and meaning, like my friendships or creative practice. I think I have maybe more than most people. I have a tendency to want to lose myself in other people and so it was useful having the universe give me a little time out and be like, "No."

Meg: Lately I've been experiencing sort of my own version of the withdrawal from my distractions. I also like to throw myself into other people as a distraction. I've been slowing everything down and remembering and really trying to be like, "Okay, I'm grateful for the pain that I'm feeling."

I know it sounds so... I have totally judged people, especially with my own internalized misogyny, being like, Oh, this woman is like 'I'm so grateful. Live, love, laugh, take a moment to breathe.'" And I'm really fully embodying that right now in a tongue and cheek way.

But also I'm like, "Okay, I'm so grateful that I can breathe every day if I remember to breathe," and it's funny and I'm making fun of myself because obviously I was judging these other people because they're actually just happy and I was not. But I love my plants and I love walking, and breathing and going outside and also my friendships, and really noticing what else is coming up in those withdrawal moments when you're like, "Okay, I can throw myself into touring." But I can't right now. I'm not getting into another relationship. I'm not going to a friend's thing. I can't even work. I mean, yeah, I've been productive and I've been thankful for the things that I have, but noticing what's coming up and I'm like, "Oh, there's actually so much grief that's so unrelated to this." But I'm feeling grateful for my practice, to be somebody with a practice.

Also, one thing that's so fucking cool is that anybody can do this—anyone can draw a picture. Anyone can, if you're able bodied, go for a walk or go outside. Anybody can use their imagination in a way that puts their pain

outside of themselves and can help them work through it. It can be really, really hard to take that first step. It seems so simple, but it can be so far away from you when you're in it.

Jenn: My codependency was so reinforced that when I'd have people suggest something like being alone or by myself to me, I would literally just be like, "That sounds boring. Why would I do that?" It wasn't until I was literally forced into that situation and I had to figure out how to make it work. What I'm realizing is that I'm thinking a lot about eros, the life force of a lot of people would associate eros, with romance or with non platonic love. That force in my life has been so directed at these romantic relationships and what I'm discovering now is when you take that shit off the table that force doesn't disappear. What it's discovering is that it just manifests.

Meg: It redirects.

Jenn: I start to find it in other areas of my life. It emerges, infusing the other more typically mundane parts of my life with that same sort of magic sparkle I'd associated exclusively with feeling the heart of another person. Of course, love is not something I ever want to be gone from my life. It's one of the most important things about being alive. But I think my relationship with it was unhealthy. And the reminder that you can feel that spark or that eros, that's that life force, in other areas of your life is such an important reminder. That's the thing. It's not about any one other person. It's about being in love with desire itself. The life force itself is the thing that you want.

Meg: Fuck, yeah.

Jenn: That, to me, has been the realization of my week: I do feel the same magic and I feel it on my own and I feel it in experiences where in the past I would feel as though I would need to be witnessed by another person.

Meg: Of course, that's reinforced to go along with the idea of success, too. This need to be witnessed by another person. I feel like the shame of success ties into that, because then you're like, "I have to show everybody that I'm loving myself by getting their love." It's a dangerous cycle, and it's funny how much even the idea of loving yourself is complicated. Everybody's so afraid of being selfish or self-centered or really myopically turned inward, but you can't love another person or your job if you don't love yourself. There's going to be so many blockades if you don't get yourself right with you. It's so hard to admit and it does sound corny, but a lot of times corny is just real and is universal.

Jenn: Fuck, it's such an easy thing to just toss up being like, "Yeah, love yourself." It is such a fucking line, and it's so humbling to actually try to do it.

Meg: Right. When you were a kid, how many times did you have your parents or people around you or influencing you to say you should love yourself first or prioritize yourself? No one ever says that. Everyone's like, "You hurt that kid's feelings, go apologize right now because he's crying." But actually, why don't they ask "Why did you hurt his feelings?" "Maybe are you hurting, too?" "Let's talk about that first." And I'm like, "Damn, little Meg."

Jenn: That's what I've been thinking about, too, in the way that so many of us are not taught what healthy conflict looks like. Conflict is growth. Growth and love and real intimacy, all these things that are the backbone of love, of connection, of understanding, of building a society and relationship. It all comes out of healthy, respectful conflict in communication. It's kind of like we're almost expected to just figure it out for ourselves, and some people have an ability and some people are just floundering with it because it's painful. It requires an incredible amount of strength and empathy to sit with an uncomfortable feeling or stick with something that points out something about yourself that is not easy to hear and not react offensively. And still to hold space for your own emotional reaction, and then the emotional reaction of another person simultaneously.

That kind of is what I've been thinking about with rage week. I grew up in a somewhat traumatic environment and I was socialized as female, and so much of my life has been spent feeling the depth and intensity of my own feelings. And also always being hyper aware of other people's feelings, other people's emotions and prioritizing them and managing them, and controlling them so that I can feel safe as opposed to just being able to feel my own fucking feelings and be able to honestly communicate that to another person. It's wild.

Meg: It's like being in your 30's.

Jenn: I feel like a baby, and I'm waking up and I'm just like, "Oh fuck, I don't even know who I am."

Was the process of writing songs in part about heartbreak a way to move past the heartbreak?

Jenn: I think it was an essential part of the catharsis of it, yes, because one of the defining aspects of what is painful about heartbreak is that you have all these feelings about another person, but they are no longer available to be a receptacle for your feelings. The feelings have to go somewhere, and for me often it's into something like that, a song.

I look back at it now and I'm like I can be like, "Oh, I think that's a good song," but also very embarrassed because it's the manifestation of a short-lived emotional reaction, particularly if it was angry. I move through anger very quickly because I think forgiveness is a sacred act of giving and love. And it's the kindest thing you can do for yourself and another person. So when I listen to a song that I've made that maybe is an angry song, I'm like, "Well, man, I'm really not there anymore." It's almost embarrassing that I ever was, but then I'm sort of forced to ask myself, "What is it about my anger I find embarrassing?" Is it because in part women's anger is devalued or we think it's cute. We think it's funny.

Meg: I don't.

Jenn: Yeah, me neither, but I think in part I've internalized, like you're saying, it's that internalized misogyny. For me, it's being like, "Oh, how silly that I was angry enough to write that song." It's like, "Oh, god, I don't like that impulse at all."

But I do think that the heartbreak—and there's more to it than that; I would be reluctant to distill the record down to just that—was an important tool in the toolkit. I don't think in it of itself it's enough. I think that a big part of it too has been committing myself to an uncomfortable amount of emotional growth and expansion, and prioritizing the things in my life that I know are healthy and good for me. So investing in friendships, investing in taking care of myself, learning how to cook, feeding myself properly, exercise, nature, the things that fill my life with joy and meaning just kind of doubling down on them. I think that all of it kind of has to work. The healing comes from the combination, not necessarily just the one thing. It's a lot of work.

Meg: It is a lot of work, Jenn, and it's worth it.

Jenn: It's a fuck ton, especially when you're also dealing with the collapse of society as you know it. That said, we are resilient as human beings, and we can do a lot more than we think we can.

Jenn Wasner Recommends:

"Tried to Tell You" by The Weather Station

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek by Annie Dillard

Non-Violent Communication

Miranda July's Kajillionaire

How To With John Wilson

Selected Hand Habits videos:

"4th of July"

Full performance on KEXP

"placeholder"

"can't calm down"

"Demand It"

Bonus: Perfume Genius' "Nothing at All" live in the desert for Kimmel.

Name

Meg Duffy and Jenn Wasner

Vocation

Musicians

□