

# On connecting your work to something bigger



## An interview with musician January Hunt

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2878 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Identity](#), [Process](#), [Money](#).

### Is it important for you to have different identities as a musician?

I have a lot of conceptual ideas and name identities, but it's hard to devote myself fully to any of them. It likely has to do with the feeling of being malleable in a body, and wanting to stretch that infinitely.

A lot of the work I've been making over the last few years, visually and sonically, has been about meditating on the body and how malleable my body has become through my transition processes. I've been transitioning for so long, and now I'm like, "Oh, I'm about to be 30. It's been almost 10 years," and I'm getting this weird bug about wanting to be pregnant. It's the first limitation to how I can change my body I've encountered that wasn't solely limited to my access to money. It's just not possible at this point in time, and it's brought on this sadness, but it's also an interesting place to create from.

Just yesterday, I started thinking about a concept that will hopefully help me come to terms with those realities. I've been leaning into this idea of playing dance music and of the rave as a place for a revolutionary gathering, and wanting to put that into the world creatively.

My New Castrati project has been healing. It was a low point for me after [the Ghost Ship fire](#). One of my friends, Feral Pines, passed away in it. We transitioned alongside each other when we were 21 year olds navigating the New York city punk scene, while simultaneously starting on these weird solitary journeys that punk could no longer nurture. We'd lost touch over the years and were connected only through this idea of being sisters and existing through temporary body moments.

I was in Coney Island the day of the fire. I was obsessively glued to my phone, afraid to see the confirmed list of names. Later, it was the same phone I unearthed our text message history on and discovered a correspondence from nearly seven years prior. Through that, I saw our friendship and subsequent distance.

A week later, I went out to Oakland for the first time so I could attend her memorial. I played a set using her synthesizer collection and whatever additional equipment of hers I could find. I played a set after never having used her gear. It was the first time I cried and played music. I was going through her old samples and finding little artifacts that felt immediately like we were communicating about the lost years of our friendship. We both had amassed rooms of gear during our distance and she made obsessive charts mapping out escape routes through making electronic music and the gear she would do it with. She was the first person to make me feel less alone in this world. New Castrati was born out of this desire to create from that specific feeling.

Something I'm excited to explore with New Castrati is bringing a militant identity to a community that is often times not represented that way. I'm also excited about drone, and the subtle moments that happen sonically within it. The idea of a sound cannon as a sonic weapon through shaping electricity. Basically, I'm excited about not feeling static ever, and this idea of being anti-static-everything in my obsessive brain is connected.



**How do you juggle work and your different projects?**

I had a career in the makeup industry that started about 10 years ago at a time when I was struggling with finding a place to put my identity and ease into it while also accommodating an increasingly marginalized experience. It felt like a place I could put this desire to create, while simultaneously creating myself, after 20 years of repression.

Over time, the fun ran out and I used it as a crutch and as a salary. I was struggling to balance it alongside my other projects. Last February that ended. It felt liberating to just

be like, "Well, I have to focus on survival, but also I get to do my own stuff." So now I'm struggling financially, but my free time is more significant than it has been before, which is something I'm not managing as well as I was when I had the regimented schedule. Self-regulation and more strictly regimented time is something I'm trying to learn now; like, how to actually feel like I deserve to spend energy on things that aren't immediately going to result in financial gain.

Struggling with just figuring out where money is going to come from makes the creative process difficult, because survival takes precedent and the creative process doesn't always result in survival. I'm in the place where I'm doing work I like more, but making less money. I do live sound a few days a week and that's been exciting for me. It's kind of like figuring out the way to make that meet the creative part of what I'm doing now, to make it all cohesive and to have the never-ending conversation of work and life and finances and all that just being one sort of amorphous blob of "I can do it,"... and also just doing it.

The real learning experience or takeaway from losing the safety net of a salaried job with benefits was realizing that I can still survive and do my shit and I'm not going to just disintegrate into nothing because I don't have that anymore.

I didn't go to college. It's been hard to take myself seriously without institutional backing to help cement my identity as a creative person. It has always felt like survival came first and anything else was a hobby or a pastime and trying to imagine combining these things has always felt complicated.

My mother is a visual artist with a strong work ethic, but also didn't attend university. Watching her struggle to make a living as a single mother, while also watching her always make time to be creating has been a strong inspiration. In spite of everything, she always made it work.

I wish I could comprehend that when I was younger, but growing up without a financially stable home ingrained in me that you had to prioritize making money to survive. Now I'm like, "Oh actually things are a little bit less set in stone. You're not going to disintegrate into nothingness if you can't pay your bills that week or month." That's been an exciting takeaway, but also a scary one because then you're kind of like, "Well how far can I lean into this?"

#### How do you know when something's done?

If it doesn't feel good anymore to do it, or if it feels like I answered the questions that I came to it with... for me, it's also a little more of a psychedelic feeling. It's hard to have parameters of starting and finishing when it feels like I'm trying to answer life questions with it, and trying to make a world worth living in for myself—it's a bleak world. I struggle with depression, and trying to make it all make sense and feel like, "Oh yeah, I want to be alive for this thing." I am at a place where I want to exist wholly and I want to be alive and living. That means some days it's important to specifically not be done.

#### Do you get creative blocks?

That happens a lot, but then sometimes I'll get excited about a certain sonic space or drone or have a life experience I feel compelled to write about in order to preserve a time and a feeling, and then I'm back in it. But I also just feel like it's when my body physically needs this; the way that sounds make my body feel is important to me. The feeling when writing feels finite and desperate, but also uncontrollable. If I'm not able to record, which is a block lately, I still can get lost in some sound and feel excited about at least bringing that into a live space.

I need to find the way to sit down more and do stuff that feels less creative-logistics like building the space to be always recording, and that kind of thing. I usually start my projects through naming processes—that feels like a way to punctuate a body or an identity or a body of work. I get stuck obsessing over this process and often times things don't materialize because of it. I'm always chasing the high I got when I chose and changed my name legally, and it felt so totally *right* in this way that let me build a life around it.

#### How do you stay active, and nourish your creativity, when you're not making something?

If I'm not feeling anything I'm doing or if I'm not feeling anything anyone else is doing, I have a few reset musicians that I will listen to and it will just ground me back in my love for music.

For instance, Buffy Sainte-Marie's *Illuminations*. That takes me on an exciting, obsessive journey because it's from 1969, a year in American history I'm fascinated by. It's allowed me to feel creative just in that. Also, it's this weird experimental album during a time when the folk scene was also burgeoning in a cool way. I grew up on folk. I grew up seeing Pete Seeger every year for most of my life; that's the world my mom introduced me to as a kid. I saw Pete Seeger probably every year until he died.

Buffy Sainte-Marie is also, still to this day, militant in her need to call out the dominant culture and talk about being indigenous on this stolen so called North America and that is exciting to see as a life's work. To be loud and fighting for an entire lifetime, but creating this beautiful world from that without compromise.

#### The world is pretty bleak. How do you find the energy to keep making art?

That's where I go for my inspiration. I exist in this identity as a trans person and queer person. It feels necessary to create alongside and from a history. Lately I'm thinking a lot of [David Wojnarowicz's](#) book, *Close to the Knives*. There's the erasure of gay communities. The history was erased with AIDS and systemic violence against queer and trans people. Wojnarowicz is the nexus point of that to me. His anger is palpable and vulnerable. He watched his partner [Peter Hujar](#) die of the disease that would later take him. Peter Hujar photographed Candy Darling on her deathbed. Candy is the tried and true root for this current identity I'm occupying. It is all a lineage for me. I feel grounded in knowing these connections were made that day I stole the copy of [Richard Avedon's](#) book *The Sixties* from the library I worked at throughout my teens and saw Candy Darling's naked trans body. My need to connect the dots of every experience I've ever had and graft them to the world around me, the history before me, and the future, is where my energy germinates and resides.





In *Close to the Knives*, there's the feeling of a desperate need to create, to keep the anger moving and to create through literally dying and seeing your partner die. That dire nature of needing to just create, even if what you're writing is just angry and without punctuation, even if you're just repeating yourself over and over to drive the point home. That book makes me feel unsettled and like, "Wow, it's also super dire right now," and I need to try to strive for that kind of energy despite the consequences. The same reason I'm not going to stop going to or fostering or navigating queer spaces despite the Pulse Nightclub tragedy and Ghost Ship.

I don't want to say that I'm in the same conversation of Wojnarowicz and [Candy Darling](#) and [Cookie Mueller](#) and [Marsha P. Johnson](#) and these other people, but I want to bring them to the table in whatever I'm doing and there's a lot of people that I feel that way about. There's a need to leave something behind, that's part of the conversation. There's the need to be continuing these conversations with my peers and living elders. I'm trying to build those bridges and use these histories as my education. And, also, just to answer the questions: "Why am I here?" "What's the point?" "Can I contribute to this overarching conversation?"

**How important is community to the work you do?**

It's important to have a place for it to go. I don't think it's always as important to have the feedback, just for a place for it to go where it feels connected or grounded—to occupy a physical space as a trans woman in music. With this project I played this queer commune in rural Tennessee for a festival called Idapalooza. It was a festival that Feral Pines had previously done sound at, and a portrait of her taken by my close friend and collaborator, Chris Berntsen is on the stage. They had me play on a night of mostly punk bands, and it felt cool to sort of break that up, but also be part of it in this weird way. I took her portrait down from the wall and attached a contact mic to it and put it directly in front of the stage monitor in order to feedback through her. This only could have happened in that community vacuum, in that specific physical space.

I exist as this liminal person between all these communities, which is something I've always dealt with—growing up punk but also being queer, being into industrial but also trans stuff. I'm into finding ways to bridge the gap and connect to it in my own way, so I can have the world that I want and give other people that world, too.

**Do you feel like with your music, that you're creating that world?**

I want to start a conversation about that world. I don't know if I'm interested in being the sole creator of anything, but it's exciting to me. I've performed at gay sex parties and then I've performed at noise shows and spaces in between, and you see similar people at these things. You build connections and your little family world around people who get it and who also exist in these in-between communities. As someone who's from the Hudson valley of New York and has been going to shows in New York City since I was 14, it's interesting how many people I still see around in different communities that I used to see at ABC No Rio or whatever else as a teenager. It's like, "Oh cool, you also walk this weird liminal path of being a freak and not having a home for it, but also having many homes for it." I'm walking this liminal path that has a connection between worlds.



I'm always reading, obsessing, and connecting the dots and going down the rabbit hole with stuff. Not just musically, but also through visual art and writing and then connecting the dots to blur those mediums.

I mentioned 1969 being a year that was interesting to me. My mom became an emancipated minor that year. Stonewall Riots. The internet. Woodstock. The Weather Underground. Moon Landing. Judy Garland's death. Judas Priest and The Carpenters and Coven and The Velvet Underground and the Minimoog. Easy Rider. Fred Hampton and Mark Clark murders. It was this time where counterculture and conservative worldviews clashed hard, and psychedelia was driving people into ways of existing outside of normative society.

Or, the other day I was at work and I was talking to people about 1996 as this year where I discovered my interest in music. I didn't have cable at the time and a friend of mine recorded the MTV Year End Countdown for me. So much of my musical history and interests resides in this 100 music video countdown, which I can trace to *Jagged Little Pill*, which was the first music that really made me understand the feeling that you get from music when you're so excited about it you wear down the cassette tape.

This weird tapestry of artifacts is how I got here.

#### Live photos by Nikki Sneakers

##### January Hunt recommends:

Candy Darling [My Face for the World to See](#) as the place I found solidarity

Buffy Sainte-Marie [Illuminations](#) as my reset music

1969 as the year everything changed

Provincetown, Mass. as where I would build anew at the end of the world

the color made when the strobe light hits the fog as your ghost

##### Name

January Hunt

##### Vocation

Musician



