

On always trying something new



Musician, visual artist, and costume designer Andrea Estella (Mr. Twin Sister) discusses trying any creative form that intrigues you, giving yourself more credit, and bringing a song to its final destination.

February 10, 2022 -

As told to Max Freedman, 2795 words.

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How do you make sure you're giving your different creative forms the amount of attention you want them to get?

I feel like I just don't do it. I definitely neglect certain things, but when I'm doing something visually for the band, I lump it in as music. [In 2021], I didn't get any painting done, or any of my personal work I wanted to get done, because I was focused on the record [Mr Twin Sister's *Al Mundo Azul*] and focusing more on the music video ["[Beezle](#)"] and directing it because I've never done that before.

I felt like my personal artwork, I didn't get to work on at all. I made maybe three paintings this past year, and I feel pretty sad about it. I want to get better at it because we're already starting to work on our next album, [and] I don't want to go back into putting too much attention towards one thing, but I would say I'm not that great at it.

Is this a challenge you've encountered while working on past albums too?

No, because I was more involved this time around. I focused more on costumes, and we weren't sure if we were going to do a recorded performance. I [thought] we should probably think about costumes for that. And then it turned into just a music video, and I wanted to direct the video, and that was also going to be the album art. I got sucked in and spent a lot of time building the "Beezle" costume. I do everything a certain way. I focus on too much detail and really don't make any time for anything else.

I hear what you're saying, but I also would say that the costume you're talking about is its own form of creative work.

Definitely. I guess I just don't give myself enough credit. Gabe [D'Amico, of Mr Twin Sister] will hear me talking to friends [who ask] what I've been up to [and I'm like], "Oh, absolutely nothing." And he's like, "What are you talking about? You've been sewing this thing and dying fabrics and all of this stuff." I'm really bad at realizing the amount of work I'm doing.

At times when you've felt more like you're giving your music and your visual art the attention you want them to get, have you ever found yourself needing to take a break from one to nourish the other?

I feel that way right this moment. The guys in my band, we got together this past weekend, and they jumped right into working on some new tracks, and I just couldn't do it. I had to stop and just fold paper and draw because I felt so deprived of it for the past year and a half. I have to find a better balance.

I think it's also [due to] having more time on my hands because of quarantine that I'm just like ... I don't know what to do with all the time I have. When I have less time, I feel like I'm working more because I feel like I'm pressured into using that little moment of time that I have, and I'll just bang out some paintings or be inspired to do something really quickly. It's hard to boss yourself around, and then time just slips away.

In this economy, music and visual art and design are all deeply undervalued, so how do you turn your creativity into a living? How do you balance the need for personal artistic achievement with paying rent?

You get help. I'm not able to do it, personally. I have to hustle, and my partner and I have been trying to find other ways of generating income so we can keep our artistic interests afloat. I was thinking about making some picture books recently since I feel like that could help. I love telling stories. That ties in with a lot of the storytelling I like to do with music and painting.

I just have to think of other things...I have help from family for sure. I've tried having jobs in Manhattan in the past and I feel like...it's pretty difficult to not feel beaten down at the end of the day and get any work done, but it can be done. Hopefully, if I make enough of my work, it won't have to be this way forever.

In those moments when you feel beaten down, what's helped get you back in a creative mindset or even just a mindset of feeling okay?

I feel like I've always taken jobs that don't take too much energy from my mind. I would take dumb day jobs that would pay the rent, but then I could just put my headphones on and kind of picture things. Or I would have a notepad to the side and write things down if I had any inspiration during the day, and then I would go home and work on that later or on the weekends. But I've been pretty lucky. I can't complain.

I've been offered jobs [where] I could have climbed up and made more money, but I would always turn them down just because I didn't want to be too bogged down or think too much about serious jobs...I've just always wanted to do this. That's just what I've chosen.

Thinking back to the moment that you realized, "Oh, this is what I'm going to devote my life to," what would you say to other people who are trying to come to similar decisions?

It depends what they want out of life. Some people are really set on having a certain type of life, and it's a lot of work, and it's really difficult. I feel like there's a lot of luck at hand, and I have been super lucky to have the space to do the work I want to do.

I still think it shouldn't stop you. If you feel it, you should always just try it and go for it and not worry about it too much. If it's your purpose, it's your purpose. That's it. And hopefully, everything else will fall into place as you go.

I imagine there are occasional moments of failure that pop up. If you're working on something and it's just not going where you want or it's starting to feel less joyful and more like a burden, how do you reckon with that?

I try to learn from the experience and how to do it differently moving forward, but...I don't consider anything I do a failure. You could turn around and say everything I've done is a failure because it depends what your goal is—like, what do you think success is?

[When] things go wrong or turn out differently, I'm like, "I had to do it. I have to move forward. I'm going to try this next time." I have to remind myself to stop, and tell myself to have fun, because whenever I do fail at something, it's always when I clam up and start thinking about something so much and stop having fun, and then everyone can see it. No one can enjoy it. You can feel that negativity there.

To talk more about Mr Twin Sister, it's obviously pretty collaborative, whereas I have to imagine that your visual art is more solitary. So I'm curious how the presence or absence of other people impacts your work.

I love having my band around. I've known them since I was a teenager. I feel like a lot of my paintings are of my guitarists because we've been friends the longest, and even being...like, "Okay, I have to put a melody and lyrics to this song that my friend made," it gets me to start imagining things or realizing things for my own life, to paint a picture in words. And I feel for my personal work, I don't collaborate enough, so it's definitely nice to have that moment.

When you say you feel like you don't collaborate enough in your personal work, what exactly do you mean?

Not building costumes with someone or actually sitting with someone. I don't get to do that very often. Or working on a sculpture, it's just me, always alone, working on just trying to make things happen by myself. ... Directing a music video is a good example [of the opposite]. That takes so many people to make anything happen. So that was a lot of fun, and it made me want to try it more.

I want to hear the story of how you decided, "I want to try directing a music video. I want to try taking a step into this creative direction I haven't gone in before."

I've worked with a lot of the visuals in the past, but ... I would always just do creative direction. I had my hand in everything. I would even help with the directing, but I never took any credit for it. And I was like, "This time, I want to try to do it myself." Like, storyboard and everything. I just love movies...I never thought of myself being a musician, just like I never thought I could direct something, but I have the opportunity. Why not just give it a try? I had a lot of fun. I would definitely do it again. I would love to do it and not act in it at the same time because it's so much work.

I remember about a decade ago, you and everyone else in the band made the choice to ditch the big record label you were signed to and pursue a sound that was more meaningful to you all, on your own terms. How exactly did you decide to ditch the label and forgo dream-pop for your current disco-pop sound?

[When] we got signed, we just happened to be making music that we started when we were teenagers. And at the time, it got popular, and it fit into the music that was on-trend, probably because we were all listening to the same trendy bands when we were younger. Then we started to write music that inspired us, and everybody started making this dream-pop-sounding music. It was kind of by accident. And we got signed to this record label, and I think they expected us to keep turning out that same type of music. But we were already over that when it was happening.

It took us so long to record that type of music, and we were already moving onto all the other music that was inspiring us, and we didn't want to keep sounding like that type of band forever. Today, I see so many people that are still kind of bummed by that. They want us to just continue to be that "I Want A House" band. But we're nerds, and we love so many types of music, and it's like, "This can't be it."

We always felt that the songs, when we listen back to them, they don't sound finished. It just wasn't what [the label was] looking for. They wanted more control over how we sounded. And we're like, "This isn't why we're doing this."

We ended up getting out of our contract, and we decided we should just try to keep moving forward and completing each other's ideas. That's why we got into this. That's what's fun about it for us. Then we just decided to do it ourselves because, these days, it's easier to do things by yourself. We got lucky to [have] already built a little group of people that listen to us. We had to change our name and everything. We're just lucky that there were still some people there to hear what we were still putting out without a record label.

This all makes me wonder, how do you know when a song is done?

I feel like some songs are new, and they happen really fast, and we just get excited about it, and we enjoy playing it. I think it's when you reach that moment of joy when you're just playing it and you're [like], "This is so much fun," that's it. Move on.

And then, we have songs that we've been sitting on for so many years, and we've played them live, and you have listeners that are like, "When is this song coming out? I filmed it on my phone and I have to listen. You have to go back to the recording on my phone to listen to this track. When are you actually going to put it out?" But [some] songs are a little bit touchy and stubborn, and we rewrite them a couple of times. So we'll have a few versions of the same song.

This pandemic is super annoying because I really like playing songs out live before they're recorded to figure out how to record them and really feel that they're getting closer [to being done]. But I think it's definitely [done] when we just feel truly happy playing it. If a song's not done and you play it through and it's a drag and you start hating that song, then we stop and try to rework [it]. So it's definitely [done] when you get past the point of dread.

How do you first come up with ideas for songs? How do you grow them into finished songs?

It's different every time because there are four of us. [Sometimes], we'll write a complete song. It'll have lyrics, a vocal melody, a full demo recording, and we'll just take it and maybe change a couple of things, but it's [nearly] a finished song. Or Eric [Cardona of Mr Twin Sister] will do that. Other times, I'll just have a melody that comes to my head, and I'll record it on my phone and send it to the guys, and they'll turn it into something else. [I] get this little feeling and try to quickly capture it, and then we pass it to each other to see if we hear anything else that has to be added to it. That's pretty much it.

Is there anything more you wanted to say about anything I asked or your creativity in general?

I just want to be better. I want to paint more. And I want to try oil painting. I tried ceramics for the first time a week ago. I just want to keep on trying everything and keep going as long as I can. And I'm just so happy that there's anybody out there that gives a damn, or is listening, or wants to. I'm always surprised when I sell prints and paintings. I feel like I'm in my own little tower sometimes and kind of cut off from knowing if anyone cares, but they do. It's just all in my own head, and it's just nice that there's anybody out there.

Andrea Estella Recommends:

Pomelo – a citrus that has thick green skin. Not much flesh despite the fruit's large size. Doesn't taste quite like an orange, not as tart as a grapefruit either. They are fabulous !

Jacques Pepin pot au feu recipe with turkey neck. Turkey necks are incredible if you like dark meat and enjoy sucking bones!

Gekkoso water colors which are Japanese brand I had imported. It took three months by ship! Tyrian Rose is a lovely shade and they're easy to travel with.

Kotte Toys – I gifted a few of their 1:10 and 1:12 miniature wooden chairs this holiday. It's a "one-man operation" based in Sweden. I believe his name is Gasmala Dalen. He's worked for a chair museum over the years and he's made one new chair a month since the year 2000. I'm fascinated by miniatures and I enjoy constructing them. My Christmas gift to myself was the 'Victorian Conservatory'. I can't wait for the challenge of building it. The chairs themselves are even fun to look at if you're not the building type.

Any Conservatory! They are essential to getting through the winter months. I visit a jade vine that grows at the Planting Fields on Long Island. It blooms towards the very end of the winter and they have a whole house filled with Camellia trees that bloom towards the end of January. I don't know where I'll end up in the future but one of my goals is to have my own greenhouse. Even if it isn't huge. For now the 1:12 miniature will have to do.

Name

Andrea Estella

Vocation

musician, visual artist, costume designer

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