

# On following your creative instincts



Musician and cultural curator Sokio discusses the value of trial and error, going with your gut, and the practical side of inspiration.

April 20, 2023 -

As told to Miriam Garcia, 2511 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Beginnings](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#), [Success](#), [Inspiration](#).

**You're involved in so many projects, including music composition, music supervisor, and curator. How would you describe what you do and how do all your projects coexist?**

I often find it difficult to describe myself. I'm a 50-year-old musician, composer, and cultural promoter. As an artist, I try to do what I think I need to be doing at the moment. For example, I never push myself to be composing all the time. My first three operas were a plan. I said I'm going to compose three operas. After that, I move into something else. I think my interests shift, but always in a constrained universe of things. That's how I opened a label and I ended up having artists on it. Destiny called and I played some music on a movie. That's how I started being a music supervisor in a country, Chile, where there were no music supervisors 12 years ago.

I come from a theater background and it's there that I discovered that I liked to make music. And while in the theater world, I started making music for everybody who wanted a soundtrack. That's how I became more well-known. Then I moved to opera because I was making so much music for the place that I decided that it was time to try something more in line with my intentions as a musician.

**It seems that you're not afraid to start a new project. So what would you say are the conditions that allow you to embark on a new creative venture? Have you developed an instinct, gut feeling, or process that provides an answer to when a project is worth pursuing?**

It's a gut feeling, I would say. It has always been like that. But I'm not trying stuff that is out of the universe of things I know, so I think it's pretty safe. My entrepreneurial spirit is safe in that regard. I'm trying to nurture myself all the time, trying to read and listen so I can find something that triggers my mind into making something.

**What are some good things that you would recommend to cultivate curiosity and imagination? Or the creative trigger that you mentioned?**

I'm not amused with things. When I'm into something, I can find interest, but I'm not amused. I'm not like, "Oh my god!" No. My brain doesn't explode with things. I think that when I was younger I was more connected to that part of myself that makes me wonder about everything, and now it needs more work. I think that thing that sparks creativity is pure work. It is not that my brain is like, I'm just walking around the neighborhood of New York and I'll discover something that I'll feel compelled to. No. I need to be constantly reading and working my brain out to find that tiny thing that can lead to something creative.

**What do you think it's lost and what is gained from that transition of being maybe hooked by something really**

**easily and dedicating more time and work to something?**

In order to create something I need to pursue many ideas and do trial and error every day. It can be very frustrating until I find some things. For example, just last night I dreamt about something I have been trying to solve, and literally, the idea pop up in my dream as something very concrete that I needed to produce. It was the exact combination of all of the things that I have been experimenting and asking myself and trying. This time came in a dream, but it's something very concrete. I don't consider it a miracle or something special. It was really concrete. I'm an empty vessel with my dreams. But then what happened last night, it was boring and very concrete because it's just an extension of work. I'm constantly trying to put my mind at ease and I can't. And dreams show me that I'm just continuing to work there.

**I guess sometimes the answer is shown in other ways, in dreams, in listening to our conversations. It happens to me all the time.**

The sources can be many, but the only thing that will give you the reward is just working a lot. I think that when you are young your neurons are working better and there's a better synopsis. The brain is fresh and can create meaning in a really fast way. It's so fast that it seems magic, it seems inspiration, but it's not. I mean, your brain is working, putting these things together. I think that being successful when you're young creatively is pure luck. It's pure luck because you were able to catch that spark and do something with it. The difference now is that I need to work a lot to reach that point where something is really useful or something beyond useful. It's something that you can show somebody else and not feel ashamed. I think that the moment an idea is good you can feel free to show it to other people.

**How does talent fit into this equation?**

For me, making music is a very alone endeavor. I just try to follow my own path in that sense. I can understand the appeal for young people to be just grabbing stuff from here and there and trying to create something new, but I don't know if I am in the position of creating something new. I can only think about my work as creating something good.

**How do you know when something is good enough to keep pursuing?**

When I'm not changing it. Let's say I create this song and I have many layers of instruments and there's the vocal melody. If the vocal melody continues there, but I'm changing everything else, I'm sure that the melody is right. That's how I feel it. So then I start messing around with that and just focus on the other elements.

And on the opposite, if I feel that everything else is right, but the melody is wrong, I need to work on the melody. It's like, when you go to buy clothes, you can get lost in the store or you can just go straight to what you need to do there. I know that I don't use these colors, so I'm not even looking at them and I just focus on the stuff that has the right colors for me. I try to do that, to just go straight to the point. Because I think that because I have so many other interests I want to just move forward and have time to do other things.

**You are premiering your fifth opera, Paraíso at National Sawdust this summer. Would you say that it gets easier now that you have more experience?**

No. I feel in the same place over and over. I mean, yes, I know how to do things, but the spark, the creativity, that thing that you're looking for, I need to work as much as always to get it, to grab it and continue working. But when I discovered that the theme for Paraíso was right, some things popped up in my mind like, "Okay, so maybe I'm going to use this instrument, or I'm going to work with the voice in this way, or it will be simpler or more complex than other stuff that I have done."

Those questions start the process of writing. That's when the gut feeling arises. When I'm certain that there's a story that I want to talk about, then I create this setup that I have in my brain, and from there I start composing. I started working on it three years ago. Then in 2021, I had this grant that allowed me to have a lot of time to focus on my projects. That's when the project started. It was pretty fast. I managed to create some

mockups and I throw more ideas. And then my brain starts exploding. I start talking to people, "I really want to do this thing. What do you think?" That's how I ended up with the team I have.

Also, when I made my first opera, I was super happy and nervous about what the critics would say. Then, the opera was called the best Chilean opera in the past 10 years. I was an independent musician with an independent play in a weird space and these guys loved it. And that scared me a lot because it set the bar so high that for the next work, I couldn't fail. I needed to be at least the same. I don't wish that for everybody. I think that in order to be creative, to have the mental space to create, you can't have that kind of information around you, because it can influence things. Luckily, it was well received.

**What do you think are the elements of a fruitful collaboration?**

Understanding of the limits of the other. If I'm composing for a film or a video project or a theater play, I'm not the director. I'm just a piece of the machinery. I can have opinions, but I don't intend my opinions to try to change the vision of the creatives that are on top of me. My opinions and the conversations that I can have with the creatives, a director or a writer, are more about trying to be in sync about the things we like so I can show something that aligns with the person. If I'm working with somebody, I'm confident about that person, so I don't need to be doubting about what the result will be.

**You're the director of the New Latin Wave, this is a multidisciplinary platform for Latinx artists mostly based in NYC. When you have this project, did you wonder if there was an audience for it?**

The New Latin Wave was created with one purpose, which was to connect a community of creatives. Obviously, it started with the one I had closer. But at the same time, I was asking everybody to amplify it.

What I perceived in 2016, was that there were a lot of Latinx artists who knew each other or knew about each other, but they never had a conversation, they never worked together, even being friends. Why that wasn't happening? That was the only way to create something that transcend personal success, and personal work. That was the idea, to create a space where all these people can connect. I think that was very successful. It created momentum. People are very aware of this because amplify it fast.

Participating or being aware that there's a community around you is the only way to grow artistically, because the community should support you, should create space for you, and should amplify your reach. Because otherwise, things don't happen. It would be impossible for you to be a musician and try to present your work, but who knows about you? I mean, if you're at home, how you will open up? That's what is generally the problem a lot of young people have, that they don't know how to participate in a community, how to create it. I firmly believe that digital communities are great, but they work in a certain universe. And that real connection, the real participation, people in the same space sharing is what at the end of the day will sustainably be a healthy one.

**It seems that you started being a music supervisor when there were no jobs like this in Chile. And you started New Latin Wave because it was a special place to build community. How do you spot these creative opportunities?**

With many things, being in the right place at the right moment makes a difference. But to be in the right place at the right moment, you need to be outside. You need to be able to reach out to people, to go to the right events or community events. You need to create a connection. That is what I was participating in when that happened. I created a music label because I have the need to create a space for my own music to grow. I would say that to get there, you need to be connected somehow and you need to learn who to be connected with. You need to be showing what you're doing. Otherwise, how that will happen? You need to be friends with your community. You need to understand what is happening around you and work with that people and try. And that will lead to other opportunities.

Also, my recommendation for really young people is to go and start working on what they think they want to do immediately. Because what's the point of going to art school for, I don't know, five years just to, share a number, and then start your career? You have a great opportunity to start your career immediately while you are

growing and learning, while you have a community around you that you can get ahold of and invite to your things. That's the moment you should be being creative and creating with others.

#### **Sokio Recommends:**

Everybody should listen to Wire, one of my favorite bands since I was a teenager. Their album A Bell Is A Cup is one of the best British pop jewels, a new wave pinnacle. But it wasn't until I heard Colin Newman's "Commercial Suicide" that I understood what I really wanted to do as a musician, sonically, instrumentally, by layering traditional instruments with electronics.

Meredith Monk's Turtle Dreams was another ear-opening moment for me. If Wire and Newman showed me a very minimalistic but baroque music approach, "Turtle..." would teach me how to simplify the sonic experience but with the same effect.

In my twenties, one book that changed me was Banana Yoshimoto's Kitchen. Both *Kitchen* and the short story included in the same book, "Moonlight Shadow," hit me like a rock and put me in a dreamlike state of mind that is still with me. I had never felt so immersed in a story or characters. Yoshimoto's writing transcends Japanese; it feels equally magical in Spanish or English. The movie is excellent too.

Synthesizers are my main thing, but sampling has been my passion since I was a teenager, and having a to-go machine that allowed me to create on the road was always a dream. Since 10 years ago, I've been a devoted user of Teenage Engineering's OP-1 synth. That compact machine renewed my love for hardware synths and sampling and is heavily used in my next opera, "Paraíso."

And last, everybody should drink pisco sour every weekend at lunch. A delicious drink that Chileans and Peruvians share (and can fight for!). The perfect drink for a date.

#### Name

Sokio

#### Vocation

composer, musician, producer, music supervisor, cultural curator

□

Catalina Kulczar