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January 6, 2023 -

As told to Max Freedman, 2773 words.

Tags: Music, Design, Art, First attempts, Process, Collaboration, Inspiration.

On trying new things

Karl Kuehn on trusting yourself enough to explore new creative fields, bringing others into your work, and using art to process grief. You work in music, film, fine art, and graphic design, and you have an interior decoration hobby. What motivates you to do so much, and how do you avoid creative blocks and burnout?

I'm motivated to do so much because no one thing has taken over. I would love for music to be the thing that I'm doing 29/8, and then, I would fall back on the other things as hobbies that bring me joy or other ways to just be creative. But for the most part, I do them all because I have the time right now.

Typically, I will experience burnout with one of the things and then immediately move to another thing. In 2018, when I first moved into this house, I was hell-bent on only working on the house. And then, when I would be sick and tired of painting or stripping popcorn off the ceiling, I would go sit down with the guitar and start fumbling around and try and work through my feelings.

Painting a house is not going to help you expunge the stress of your day-to-day life. It's instant gratification once it's done, but that didn't help me mentally process my mom's brain damage. Sitting down and playing guitar, really putting pen to paper, trying to figure out where my brain is at in processing that, that's just moving from one creative outlet to another.

The same thing applies to the fine art stuff. I got really into making xylene transfers last year when I felt like I had too many songs, so I didn't need to write a bunch more. In terms of now working in film, it's just pure luck that I ended up in a creative field for a job, because I've had plenty of jobs before this that were not creative at all. It's just feeding a lot of different palettes that I have, and I enjoy satisfying them.

How do you go about learning all these new things? How do you break into new creative fields?

I just find things I like and dive into them and just assume that I can do them. And nine times out of 10, I'll do it wrong.

I joked the whole time I was fixing up the house that, if I had an HGTV show, it would just be me trying to figure out how to do something, and I'd fuck it up a hundred times, and then by the end of the episode, the wall is painted and it's gorgeous. You're at the 20-minute mark of the episode, and you're spackling and sanding out some horrible blemish you've made because you put too much paint in one area, or the brush was entirely sopping wet and it's dripped all over the floor, so you're picking it off the floor. There's a lot of applying yourself to the process, letting it wash over you, and seeing where you come out on the other side.

A lot of what we're talking about is solo work, but you've also been in bands. How does the presence or absence of collaborators affect what you do?

Being in a band...it's those same people until you have lineup changes. They're guaranteed to be there in the process, and that can yield wonderful products.

But doing a solo project like Gay Meat, I get to choose who I'm collaborating with and to what extent. For the [Bed of Every] EP, I had the five songs I had written on just guitar, and I'd demoed out some drums, wrote the vocals and demoed that out, and I brought them to my friend Brett who has a studio and is a producer. We truly got to build them from my ground-level ideas up.

I went home after our first two days in the studio, and we hadn't tracked any bass. Brett sent me a video of him playing bass over one of the songs. That's a bassline I never could have written.

I'm tempted to ask how you know when it's time to bring a collaborator in, but it sounds like you're saying it's always time to bring a collaborator in.

Always. The worst I've ever felt in a creative field was when I felt too attached to my own ideas to share them before they were done. Anytime I felt like I was working on something I was so proud to show people that I made by myself, there's this pride in half your body, but there's also this horrible anxiety that it's not going to hit as hard as you want, and there's a 50/50 chance of that happening. I have let myself down before in that regard, where I've been so anxiously excited for the world to hear this thing that I've been working on and guarding, and then it comes out and it's just another album.

You've been plenty creative outside music behind the scenes. How does having your name and face directly attached to something, versus being in the background, affect your creativity?

I think it motivates the creativity. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't in the studio at the end of last year excited to see my name on Stereogum and Brooklyn Vegan and the music sites that I've gotten press on before. I missed that feeling because it is really validating when you are creating music, especially when you're in an environment like where I am in Southport, North Carolina, where it's not a huge creative hub.

Accessing the public sphere in that way is really inspiring and a huge part of what drove me to actually finish the EP. I missed the validation that comes with releasing something and being told, "Hey, you are good at this."

Posting pictures of the house on Instagram and getting a couple hundred likes is one thing, but it doesn't change you internally. The way your music can hit when you're going through a public press cycle and making new fans or you're out playing shows and meeting the kids that support you, that feeling is, chef's kiss.

Given the current challenges with touring, how do you think you can reach people to help with this part of your creativity?

It's so hard. I haven't released music since 2016, and even then, I feel like the streaming world was a completely different landscape. The label that's putting out the EP is small, but talking with them about the streaming of it all, there's so much pressure on playlisting and reaching organic markets through streaming.

At multiple times in my career, I've just been a gay man with an iPhone. So if that's all it takes to reach the right people that you want to hear your music, then I wish it had always been like that. But at the same time, now I am that gay man with my iPhone, and I'm trying to get the thing, and it's evading me.

I feel like everything that happened to me after the last Museum Mouth record, all the stuff with my mom and the house and the band getting dropped, all these dominoes falling in a row forced me inward, and I stopped being that big public persona. I deleted my old personal Twitter account because I was experiencing this strange identity crisis where I felt like I had been one version of myself, but I was forced to look inward and reckon with what I liked and didn't like about that.

It's jarring...to rekindle that flame of yourself, to reintroduce the world to that version of you through a different lens, and maybe it's refined, maybe it's more controlled. Everything about pursuing music or any creative field is a lot of just doing it, seeing how it goes, and always checking to make sure that, if you want it to reflect you as a person, you're really part of it. I'm doing that actively now.

You were very upfront about losing your mom when it happened, and the house you've been living in and decorating is her house. Your whole life is happening from the place where your mom was living before she passed, and you've been going through a lot of transitions in that time. How did creating from that base change things for you?

It inspired me a lot. My mom bought this house in 2013 and moved into it in 2014. If you look at your life in eras, the era when she bought the house and moved into it was when my life really started to change. I sent the tweet that got us signed to Equal Vision on the swing on the front porch.

I moved out of this house in 2015. To be back in it in 2018 through now kind of feels like I'm restarting. I've come home to my literal home now, and I'm starting from the same place I was in 2014 when I sent the tweet. And this time around, it's just me, unfortunately. The goal was always to have my mom come home, but it's just me here, doing it all again by myself. If everything happens for a reason, then there's got to be a reason why I'm back here on memory lane in Southport, North Carolina, and it looks completely different and I feel completely different, but the bones are the same.

Was your creativity a coping mechanism?

Absolutely. The minute I got the call that my mom was on her way to the hospital, I [probably] had the notes app on my phone open and was just typing what I was thinking and feeling. For the Gay Meat LP that I've been working on since 2019, I wrote 14 of the songs when she was in the hospital and when she finally got out and was sent to the nursing home. It was me processing all of that in real-time and trying to canonize it in my brain in a way that made sense to me.

I've always written songs about my experiences. I've always used [music] to process my emotions and my thoughts. That time was incredibly charged, and I'm so unbelievably proud of those songs. I cannot wait for the world to hear them. But I am also very happy that...these five random songs I wrote in 2020 and 2021 are the first release under Gay Meat that people are hearing.

These songs feel like a stepping stone going from Museum Mouth to the [forthcoming] songs about my mom's brain damage. It feels like *Bed of Every* is a great way to get people from point A, Museum Mouth, to point B, the Gay Meat LP, which is the whole reason I started the project in the first place.

I was writing these songs in 2018 while my mom was experiencing all this in the hospital, in the nursing home, and I just didn't want to lay that on my bandmates. It felt like taking the most personal thing you've ever written and bringing it to your crew and letting them start to stake out real estate and ideas. [The songs] didn't need that. They just needed me, and time with me, to become what they're going to become.

How do you know when a song is done?

Well, nothing's ever really done, right? But every now and then, when you're working on something, even if it's for one millisecond, you'll hear a squeak in your brain of a voice saying, "This is finished." It's reached a point that you're happy with.

Recognizing that voice and making a move then is so important. Even if it only feels done to you for one second, you have that feeling, and you need to capitalize on that.

You were the drummer in Say Anything. I suppose you could call that band famous. I'm curious what you learned about your creativity in a setting that's so elevated.

My whole stint with Say Anything is probably the most my imposter syndrome has ever flared up. My imposter syndrome was in the room, it was its own person while I was trying to record. It was truly shocking going from recording a thousand vocal takes in your room and using 100 of them at the same time to literally rawdogging it and doing one vocal take and that being "the take." But it taught me a lot about myself and about what recording in a studio actually is.

Dealing with all that imposter syndrome and then coming out on the other side of it, and then the record coming out and people being so excited about it, was amazing, because [later] Say Anything releases were very polarizing with their fan base. To have a record with my thumbprints all over it and have the fan base love it, that took that imposter syndrome and hit it over the head with a brick. It was like, "You know what, you are capable of doing the thing that you love to do." If you love to do this, then you have to buckle in and prepare to experience all the highs and lows that come with pursuing it.

That was everything that I wanted to ask you, but if there's anything else you wanted to bring up, go for it.

I only write songs when I want to or when I feel like they have to come out of me. I feel like there are a lot of bands, especially when you're first starting a band, where you're like, "Okay, we just have to write 10 songs." The songs you write are going to be better when you feel like you have something to say or, if you're an instrumental artist, you have an idea you feel like you simply must record or that really excites you and you want to see it to the end. That's when it's worth writing the songs. If you're just sitting down to write songs for the sake of writing songs, you're not paying any homage to the craft.

If it feels like it has to come out of you, then capitalize on that moment and write the damn thing. I feel like that applies to my lot in life over the last few years. I got forced to move into this house as a fixer-upper, so I fixed up the house. You have to capitalize on a feeling when you have it and worry about [whether it's good] later. You can always listen back to the demo. If the demo sucks, then scrap a song, or edit it. But just always ride that intuition. And if you're excited to do something, then do it.

Karl Kuehn Recommends:

Self record! I spent 7+ years releasing music I recorded myself. Teaching yourself how to use a DAW like Garageband, or Logic will give you so much more context for the process of making something sound good. AND it will expand your creativity! I only feel like I am able to comfortably work with a producer now because of my experiences self producing.

Self release! So much goes into making music happen in the public sphere. A lot of folks want, or even worse—expect—a fast pass into the music industry. But making your own tapes, outsourcing CD duplication, distributing your songs to streaming, just getting all your ducks in a row on your own will make you REVERE the folks who do that for you later.

Make your own album art! I wouldn't be lucky enough to get to work with so many artists I love on designing and laying out their album art if I never started making my own!

Believe in yourself! So unbelievably corny to say. But so much of pursuing anything starts with wanting to do something, and every step after that is just reminding yourself that you can! Before I started fixing up my mom's house I had maybe only ever painted one wall. I'd never painted cabinets, doors, much less every wall in an entire home...multiple times!? But I wanted to, and I was too broke to hire someone, so I just did it.

Remember why you're doing it. I started writing and self recording songs because I wanted to say something. I started doing album art because I wanted to see something. I started fixing up my mom's house because I loved her dearly and wanted to make her proud.

Name

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Vocation

musician, graphic designer, interior decorator, fine artist

Fact

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