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August 13, 2024 -

As told to Brodie Conley, 3928 words.

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# On the power of nurturing creative community

[Musician, illustrator, and photographer Hannah Judge \(fanclubwallet\) discusses the importance of local scenes, knowledge sharing within artistic communities, and working as an artist with a disability.](#)

**I've been a fan of your work for a while now and it's been a joy to see it evolve at such a rapid pace. As you've grown outward, you've been steadily working to strengthen the creative and music community in and around Ottawa. You've been instrumental in hosting DIY shows, and supporting a network of artists. I'm wondering, how do you feel that participating in and helping to build a local music community helps artists to be more creative?**

Well for me, I love the local community so much because I grew up in it. I think that if I didn't have the opportunity as a teenager to go out and see all ages shows and take part in art fairs at places like [House of TARG](#) or [Pressed](#), I would have never gotten into music and art in the way that I am now. So the local Ottawa community is really important to me because I've seen a lot of those places up close, and all I want is more opportunities for teenagers—like how I had—to be able to experience the arts community, so that we have more generations of artists. Because if we're not fostering these spaces and these opportunities for young people, then who's going to do art? It will just stop.

**I love that. So it's a little bit of a pay it forward mode.**

Yeah. And the Ottawa community is so amazing. I've been to a lot of places now, and any time I come back to Ottawa I'm thrilled and excited, every time. I don't feel like any other place could replace how I feel about the Ottawa music scene.

**Out of your community building work, you and your partner and collaborator, Michael Watson, decided to start [Club Records](#), which you describe as a "label, sort of." You've now worked on and released a number of albums via Club Records. Can you talk a little bit about how you think about working with other artists and supporting them to help them achieve their vision, whether through production or supporting the release and distribution of their work?**

Club Records is definitely a label, sort of, in the terms that we are not doing any traditional deals. We aren't giving out any money at this time. So, the most is we'll take a small royalty percentage on things Michael's produced or I've produced. And I think for me at least, when I started putting out music, everything was so scary and I had no idea what I was doing. Growing up in the music scene, I saw so many bands that, to me, were the best band in the whole entire world and they'd make this music and put it out, but it would never really go anywhere and then they'd break up. And I think that's a tragedy.

So the point of Club Records is to share any resources that I've learned from working with labels—touring, doing stuff in the US, any of the bureaucratic confusing stuff—because I don't want to see any musicians just not know what they're doing and then not want to keep going. Club Records is definitely just to really try to help lift up other Ottawa artists and get people to notice them. I want everyone to hear their music because when I hear a song written by them, it feels like my whole life changes. Music has the power to make you feel like your life is amazing.

**That's really beautifully said. Aside from acting as that sort of quasi label, Club Records also encompasses a really neat full library of resources for musicians. On your website, there's an archive of**

**articles and guides focused on everything from how to distribute your music to getting a touring visa to filing your taxes. Can you discuss how your own experience of coming up as a DIY focused artist in the music industry led you to create this idea of the resource library and Club Records as a way of sharing that knowledge widely?**

I think it really started with the realization that every time I do a release cycle, I find that I have to relearn what the release cycle is and the kind of things that I am supposed to do for that. So I was like, "Oh man, someone should really be writing this stuff down, so that I have a checklist and I don't forget." And I was like, "Wait a second. I can just write this stuff down." And for a long time, as well, people had been reaching out to Michael, who had been distributing music since they were 14. People would reach out and say, "Hey, how do I put my music on DistroKid or any distributors? How do I pitch through Spotify?" yada, yada, yada.

Michael actually already had a resource written up on how to do this and I was like, "Well, we've already got one. I'm just going to put it up on a website." So Club Records kind of started as... it was almost like a joke. Then everyone else started taking it really seriously and so did we. The resource page definitely, I was like, "I can never remember how to do any of this stuff and I can never find anything about any of it online. And so someone's got to put some of this stuff online."

**Have you received a lot of feedback or outreach from artists or individuals you might not even know that are like, "Oh wow. I didn't realize this existed."**

Definitely. A lot of people also have reached out to me about getting those touring visas. I feel like that's a popular resource on the webpage. And I've gotten some really good feedback, too, from people I don't even know about different things that I could add to the website. It's important I think to note that. If you have anything you think needs to be added to the website, I'm not always the most on top of it person. So we're always looking for new resources to add or share. And each document on there is editable by anybody.

**So a call-out for others to get in touch if they have knowledge to share! Speaking of the process of starting Club Records and building community, I'm wondering, looking inward for a second, what have you gained for your own creative process from working with other artists, producing them, mentoring them? Has it affected how you create?**

I think yes, because I used to be really, really shy, and I never wanted anyone to hear any of my music. Even working with Michael, I'd make them stand in the other room and I'd start playing a song and then they could slowly come in. I've gained so many really great friends in the music community and it's awesome having so many amazing musicians that I know I can collaborate with in different ways. It's also great for my artistic process. I feel like now I know so many amazing artists to work with on things like album art, music videos, and stuff like that. I just went from being very shy, in my own bedroom, "Don't look at me," to, "Let's all get in here, and hang out, and make something awesome."

**Having cultivated this strong foundation from a DIY culture and philosophy, what fundamental insights have you gained in navigating the music and creative industries yourself? How has your work at the local and community level framed how you look at trying to build your project and career in this broader music and creative industry ecosystem?**

I think that at the end of the day, knowing that your local community is always there is really helpful. When you're putting out music in the world, I feel sometimes, as a Canadian, kind of left behind in a way because everyone I know in the major label world is over there in the US. And sometimes I can feel kind of lonely, but then I just have to look around and realize I'm not alone at all. I think it helps me to not take everything so seriously and just remember that it's not all industry brain stuff. Your friends and the music that you're making from your heart is really what's important at the end of the day. I think that being involved in DIY culture helps you stay true to yourself and not get super depressed about some of the things that kind of suck in the broader spectrum of everything.

**What would you tell an artist who wants to get involved with or even start a local artistic scene in their community? Are there one or two pieces of advice that you think are crucial?**

I would say, even if you think that no one's going to be interested in what you want to put on, it's not true. There's always people that are going to want to participate in DIY art or music and I think you have to do it. You will not regret making something that people can be a part of, and you will not regret reaching out to your community, even if you don't know that the community is there yet.

**On the subject of expanding your creative practice to include your community, your latest single and upcoming EP are, for the first time, full band endeavors. What made you decide to expand and formally include others in the songwriting and recording process for fanclubwallet? And did this emerge from your work of community building in Ottawa?**

So I met the rest of the touring band—now the full band—because Michael was in a band called Amnita, and they needed a tour photographer. At that point, I had been doing a lot of concert photography, and photos and videos for bands for free in Ottawa, and they were like, "We need a tour photographer." That was definitely my biggest dream in the whole world. So I wanted to go on that tour, and I loved their music and really wanted to do anything I could to help support it. Not saying that you should do artistic work for free. I'm just insane.

So, I've known them for a while now and we've been touring together and I was going through this really terrible bout of writer's block. I had gone to New York to try to write with people and it just made me even more depressed. And then I came home and I was like, "God, I'll never write another song again." But we went on tour and I had been listening to all this music and I was like, "Everyone's band is so good. All these bands are amazing. How do I become such a cool, good band?"

We were at an Airbnb that we were staying at and I had the beginning part of this song and was feeling down because I couldn't think of anything else, and I was like, "You know what? Good thing all my friends are here and are amazing musicians." We all kind of just started working on this song together and it came together so quickly, and I was like, "Wow. The answer's right in front of me. These guys are my best friends, so why haven't I been looking to them to help me make music?"

**It's really cool that it just sort of came naturally and was really organic. Would you say there is a core value you look for in your collaborators?**

I don't know if I've ever thought about that. I think I definitely vibe with people who also really believe in just uplifting each other. I don't think anyone should be secretly battling inside. I feel like I've experienced that, where people secretly are like, "I'm going to do a nice thing for you, but it's only because it's going to be great for me later."

**That's interesting. So would you say that you might prioritize the person or personal, over even the musical aspect for collaborators? As in, valuing that sort of interpersonal value set before whatever musical skills they might have.**

I think so for sure because if you're secretly evil it's not going to work.

**How do you feel about being a band leader now? Was it a natural transition? And how do you navigate the challenge of incorporating everyone's views while still trying to stay true to your original artistic vision?**

I think we're really lucky because we've toured together and had to spend months on end together in a small GMC Safari. I think that if Nate [bass player in fanclubwallet] writes a bassline I don't like or something, I'm not afraid to be like, "Yo man, that sucks." But I definitely am really lucky to have learned from Michael, who has been a band leader far longer than I have. When we first started touring and when I first started doing anything that involved needing to have a band I was able to ask Michael about values and what's the best way to treat fellow musicians. So I'm super lucky to have learned pretty much everything I know about being a band leader from them.

**What does the writing and recording process look like for you as a full band now? Is it a lot of you starting an idea, like you were describing earlier, and then bringing everyone in to work on it?**

I'm just going to let the dog out. [Hannah lets her dog outside] Be free.

He's crazy.

What does the writing process look like? I think it definitely sometimes is me starting stuff. We went to a cottage in the middle of nowhere to try to write some songs and I was surprised at how easy it was to just start off jamming or start from a guitar idea Eric [guitarist in fanclubwallet] might have had, which is awesome. So I think now new ways of writing are definitely coming into the process, which is exciting.

**That's exciting. It's continuously expanding your own artistic practice and approach through collaboration.**

Yeah, for sure. It also helps me help other people if other people need help writing a song. Now I'm way more used to really relaxed collaboration. So I'm not afraid to jump in with an idea.

**In addition to being a musician, you're also an illustrator and a cartoonist, and I didn't realize you were a tour photographer, as well. I'm wondering how your visual arts practice complements your musical work? Does it feed into your creative practice as someone writing music, and vice versa?**

I think so, definitely. Especially for this first project with the band, it was really inspired by '90s scenes, Scott Pilgrim, comic books, and artwork. I really wanted to make this collectible version of fanclubwallet and that started with me making all these little comics about being in a band and what that's like, which is what the song "Band Like That" is kind of about. I would say that definitely those things feed off of each other. A lot of the time if I can't get something out in a song, I'll be able to get it out in a comic. Or if I can't get it out in the comic, then I'll be able to get it out in a song.

**It sounds like the visual side especially helps you elaborate on the sort of narrative and storytelling that you want to do in your music. Do you think a lot about your music as storytelling?**

Yeah, I think so and I think my art school brain thinks of every music thing, not just as like a song, but as a whole project. So to me, all the parts have to come together. Whether I'm doing the creative illustration for it or getting a friend to do it, it's really important to me that the art complements the music. They're definitely interlocked.

**It's really interesting that you think of it all as a whole, interconnected project, which, to my mind,**

**calls up the tension between the traditional idea of full albums holding together a narrative, while in the current creative and music industries there's a lot more focus on singles and one-off releases. What do you think about that tension? Do you just kind of push through it and say, "I'm making the thing I'm making and this is how I want to release it"?**

I think I'm definitely kind of like, "I'm making the thing I'm making." Sometimes I'll do that and then I'll be like, "Oh my God. What did I do? This isn't going to go well." But then that's just my brain being scared. That's never true. I think even with singles though, you can definitely make a single into a project. There's definitely songs where I've been like, "This song is a whole bigger story, so we need to have a lot of art or visual media to go with it."

**You've been very public about living with Crohn's disease and engaging with disability as an artist. On Instagram you described producing your EP *Hurt Is Boring* with the phrase "Time to record and produce this EP from bed, the disabled way." I wonder if you can talk a bit about how disability shapes your ability to create as an artist, and how it impacts your creative process.**

That EP was really funny to make. I'd be lying down in bed and Michael would hold a microphone over me, or just really funny positions to be recording in. I was better for a while and then I've definitely been a lot sicker this time around. I think also with that, having the full band has been helpful, because not all of the onus is on me.

I think a lot of my music is definitely informed by having a disability. You can find a lot of lyrical content that is about it. I've definitely had to adapt.

Even on tour, I had to bring medicine around in this tiny fridge that always had to be plugged in, and so we'd get to the venue and Michael would run in and be like, "She needs somewhere to plug in her fridge." So it's funny, because it's like maybe we're late, we have to rush to load all the music equipment in, but first we have to rush in to get the tiny fridge inside of the venue.

It definitely impacts how I have to write things, but I think something that's really important to me is when I was 16 and I was diagnosed I thought my life was over and I could never do art. I literally sent my best friend a message, "I need to quit being an artist now. It's not going to work out because I'm sick." That's why I'm so public about it, because I don't want anyone to ever feel like they can't do their dream. Because it's your dream. You can make it work for you. It doesn't have to be what you thought it was going to be. It doesn't have to get in the way.

**Why do you feel that it's important to share your experience with disability as part of your lyrical and musical story?**

It's definitely just write about what you know. So a lot of that is just what comes out. And especially even in my comics too, I'm always drawing about being sick. I think that people can listen to the lyrics and take them however they want. I would never want to be like, "No. It's about this. You have to think about it this way." But the idea that maybe someone might listen to a song and be like, "Oh, this is really relatable to how my life is, but I don't know, she made a song about it so maybe I could make a song about it too or something."

**How has living with Crohn's shaped your transition into working as a full-time musician? I know you said that the example of touring is more difficult. How do you find yourself making it work and being able to do your own thing within the music industry?**

I think setting boundaries and not being afraid to ask for help. At the beginning I was really scared to set boundaries because I felt very lucky. But now I'm like, "No. I make the music. You have got to listen to my boundaries."

Not being afraid to ask for help is really important. And I also think that plays into having a community of musicians. If something is overwhelming for me or I know I'm not going to be able to make album art for something, or I can't do the video. I used to do everything myself and now I know I can ask my friends to help with the artistic process, and I know that I can trust my community to help uplift me, as I can help uplift them. I just think trusting yourself and trusting your friends is good.

**Are there any specific things you think, especially thinking about the more 'official' music industry or creative industries, could be done to make it easier for someone living with disability to be able to engage and succeed within those realms?**

More accessible venues. A lot of venues have like a million fricking stairs. I can't walk an amp up a flight of stairs anymore. I just straight up cannot do that. So definitely, as far as touring goes, being more understanding of someone's limitations. I can't go out. Well I can now, but for a while I wasn't able to go out for more than two weeks at a time and I definitely got some pushback on that.

I think just being understanding and the industry maybe educating themselves more and talking to more disabled musicians to see how they can make things easier. Just even the slightest changes make things so much easier.

When I was on tour, advancing with the venues, letting them know that I needed to have somewhere to put this fridge. When we were on the *CHVRCHES* tour, the tour manager helped me out with finding places to store my medication multiple times. She didn't have to do that. That kind of thing is amazing and takes a

huge load off of me, and I don't have to be stressed about it. So honestly, even doing little things, checking in with the artists to see what specifically would help them is amazing.

**It sounds like it's a mix of structural, systemic things, but also just listening to people who are living with disability and then doing the small things that can really help make their day go easier.**

Yeah. People get so worried like, "Oh, I'm going to have to change everything and I have to restructure the whole thing." Yeah, that would be great, but everyone with a disability is so different, so just listening is a great start.

**Hannah Judge recommends:**

The Rilo Kiley "Wires and Waves" music video

The Modest Mouse *Lonesome Crowded West* documentary

The novel *This One Summer* by Jillian Tamaki

Doing donuts in the movie theatre parking lot

A Casio SA-45

Name

Hannah Judge

Vocation


musician, illustrator, photographer


Fact


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