

On cultivating your own resources



Musician and neuroscientist QUALIATIK discusses the connection between science and art, putting honest work into the world, and creating opportunities for yourself and your community even when it's a challenge.

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As told to Kristen Felicetti, 3125 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Education](#), [Independence](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Time management](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#).

You've recently returned to school to finish your degree in neuroscience. What fueled that decision? What's the relationship for you between neuroscience and making music?

To be honest, I reapplied to school on somewhat of a whim during quarantine; it seemed like the right impulse at the time, and I knew I would probably never find a time to finish my studies if not then. It has turned out to be an amazing decision, and I've been lucky in that my school has been really supportive of my return.

In terms of science vs. art, they have always gone hand in hand, I would say. I can't speak for everybody, but for myself at least, neuroscience is a question of, this thing (the brain) fascinates me like nothing else, how does it work? I think there is a lot of overlap in the intention behind this kind of study and behind making art. To closely observe what compels you until you can express in language something you want to say about it. Even the concrete process of learning how to produce music on software is an example of this. It's just a drive to engage with what speaks to you/for you/through you, which is incredibly human, and the urge to understand it.

I think, for me, music has always been some type of "inquiry" through expression. I think a lot of artists would say that creating feels like a channel from their subconscious. And that is the biggest thing I want to understand within traditional neuroscience as well. But that's also why I kind of fell out of love with lab research years ago, because empirically, it's difficult if not impossible to really study those things in a lab setting. And in addition, research is largely dictated by the interests of big investors who, in a way, ultimately shape scientific progress. It's a similar issue that artists often run into in terms of what they truly want to do vs. what they can actually receive funding for. Institutional barriers, in general, prevent a lot of people from pushing the boundaries that they want to.

But now coming back, I have realized that there is a different angle that can be taken on research, which may not be subject to the same limitations. I still don't really know what I'm talking about here, but the sense I am getting is that researching and writing "proofs," in a broader sense, or drawing lines between disparate research to fill the gaps through informed logic on paper seems may circumvent some of the bureaucratic restrictions of lab research. So I have fallen into an effort at that over the past semester, kind of by sheer luck, which I am not taking too heavily but using to explore the possibility of doing this kind of work with more agency. I am also trying to figure out how to make it coexist with creative work. I think that ultimately, it can become a conversation in which they are both integral to each other, but can also stand alone. How that will look, I don't quite know.

Do you do a lot of research before you approach a project, whether it's a song or video or something else?

Yeah, I think most of the process is just blind research.

What does that look like for you?

Well, first off, just hours of dissociating into my computer. Hours and hours and months and months. Saving things constantly, compulsively. But then it just disappears into unnamed folders which I usually can't even find again. I also tend to print images out and paste them up onto my walls and around my desk. It's a process of living in the feeling instead of thinking about it. Compiling information, sorting it together in a way that feels organic, and just inhabiting it. It is intuitive, a kind of embodied research. You build the puzzle pieces around you by feeling until it hits that sweet spot and you're like, "this way is right."



What other things do you do in preparation before actually making the thing? Walking?

Definitely walks. Long, aimless walks, sometimes taking photos. I'll usually just wander in random directions until I wind up at some endpoint. There are these train tracks near Elmhurst Park, which I stumbled across at the beginning of quarantine, when the streets were empty and I was walking around a lot. At the time I was "researching," if it qualifies as that, and once I found the tracks, I would often take breaks from long stretches of staring at my screen by walking an hour and a half to it, climbing down and sitting there for a while and I guess just letting things marinate.

I also like taking the Q train all the way to Brighton Beach/Coney Island, and then coming back, even just to sit on the train. I like when the environment around me is moving and changing, I think that's when things start to lay themselves out with meaning and emotional context. Going into [debut EP] *Discarnate*, I had brown paper up on all of the walls of my room, drew flowcharts and pasted up scribbled notes and pages from sketchbooks and journals, trying to find parallels and underlying themes. A ton of writing which I never looked at again. Just hypergraphic, stream of consciousness, writing in the margins, finding patterns and mapping ideas together over and over. If you know the scene in *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* where Charlie is pointing manically to the detective board ranting about "Pepe Silvia," it was a lot of that type of energy [*laughs*]. The "Aha!!" revelatory feeling of being onto something. I think it's important to chase the rabbit sometimes.

But it's not something you go back to. It's just the act of writing.

Yeah. The processing happens while just kind of dumbly writing it out. I don't need to go back to it because once it's written, the connections have been made. And then as more information comes in, it can be re-articulated, and the architecture can shift to incorporate it. It's very fun to even just imagine the ways in which everything connects if you just follow the thread.

I would say this is true even in terms of my project as a whole, where cognitively, there is a lattice of all the aspects of "QUALIATIK" and how it all makes sense, even though on a conscious level the act of creating feels extremely random and unpredictable. I think when you have a project with many different elements to it, the way the facets of the project coexist can be part of the artform. The music alone and the tangible things that come out of it are as well, but the way everything comes together is a larger picture, in terms of... it's really difficult to even think about how I want to present myself and things like that. That's even an element of it because these are all tools for the expression that you're trying to put out.

What do you mean by "how I want to present myself?" Like your image as an artist, an outfit, or just an attitude?

I guess all of the above. How I exist in the world, the things you have to kind of reflect on sometimes. I've always felt very disconnected. And having to make sense of how to feel comfortable being, that's an ever-changing thing. Because when I'm actually working on the art, I forget that I have an appearance at all. The research process is very disembodied. The creating process is very disembodied. What becomes embodied is performing, whether to a camera or to an audience. Also touring, because you're passing through people's lives really quickly and engaging with your physicality. There is a desire to feel that I am expressing myself accurately to the internal feeling which doesn't quite know how to "be" in the external. But I'm grateful that "being" actually feels much more intuitive when I'm on tour, like something clicks.

Speaking of touring, I think it's amazing that as an independent artist you've booked tours for yourself in places like China. How did you do that?

Well, I wasn't planning on doing an Asia tour at first, only Europe. And then I got an email from a label in Shanghai [[Genome 6.66Mbp](#)] inviting me for a couple of shows in China. And then I thought I should try to book other dates in China around it, and then suddenly I was booking a full Asia tour, because I didn't know when I would ever be able to come back to Asia, and was lucky enough to be brought there when I was touring.

So I did Hong Kong, Taipei, Seoul, and a few places in Japan, as well as other cities in China. The Asia shows were all booked almost entirely through Instagram messages. But it was hard work and took a lot of, you know, being on top of answering messages and managing logistics while already touring, following up when I needed to even though that's a horrible feeling lol. Booking shows in general can be a horrible feeling. But at a certain point, I know that it is no one else's responsibility, and the only way it will happen is if I suck up the discomfort and do what's necessary. But once it becomes material, it's an incredible feeling and so 100% worth the effort to get there.

But touring alone is really hard, and the Asia leg was especially tough. I had a show every night or every other night for a month, sometimes in cities where no one spoke a word of English, and had to communicate only through a translator app. And at this point I had been alone on tour already for four months. Also I have a chronic

injury, which is not only a nightmare to deal with on a physical and psychological level, but also very isolating when you have no one to confide in about it, and you're meeting people for the first time who you want to interact with meaningfully but are miserable from physical pain and emotional exhaustion, and don't want to put that on anyone. There were a lot of ups and downs. I was also booking the tour as I went, so when I wasn't performing or prepping for whatever was next I was scrambling with emails and logistics.

It's a big gamble.

Definitely. But I mean, at that point, it's the thrilling moment you get to exist in what you have been working so hard on. And after all you put in, what do you have to lose? I think any risk is par for the course and part of the intensity. In my experience, I feel like it pushed me to become capable of giving and enduring so much more, all the time, physically and mentally. And there is no way to describe the fulfillment of seeing the amount of labor you put into something be reflected in what comes out. The strain and sacrifice deepens the experience, not in a martyrdom way, but in that feeling of utter exhaustion when you have given yourself fully to the thing you care about. It's a glow of sorts.

It was also rewarding to learn that it was within my power to make the tour happen, without having to rely on a business model or agency. To see that the resources can be there in an organic way, that we might not have to sign away certain autonomies, or settle for dynamics we don't want. It gives me a lot of anxiety to rely on people. It's also empowering to push through the process of actualizing, to see what you alone are capable of if you don't let yourself believe that it's unrealistic or impossible. The exciting thing was to see this empower some of my friends as well, who want to tour but haven't because they didn't feel that they could. So the more we empower ourselves as individuals, the more we empower our communities.



We spent this long time indoors and now it's kind of like we're going back to normal. I'm so grateful to see my friends again, but sometimes it also feels like we've missed an opportunity to revolutionize aspects of the

world. Are there changes in the music community or the music industry that you'd like to see happen?

I think that quarantine destabilized some structures we used to rely on which may have been antiquated, and has opened space for new pathways to be formed. But I think it has also striated things a lot. At the moment, in NYC at least, many DIY venues are either struggling or have closed down entirely, and the community feels a bit fragmented as a result. What I really feel though is that the middleman can be carved out of many of the systems we have had to accept. In an age where mobility is found through the internet, I don't know if I even understand the role of a "music industry." An institution that thrives on people feeling the necessity to depend on it does not have a place in a world where movement can occur without the intermediary of an "industry cosign." So if anything, I would push for the power of community, independent decisions, independent movements, self- and co-sufficiency.

For example, the tour only happened because of direct one-to-one interactions between myself and whoever was putting together the show, through generosity and good faith. I think it is not only important but extremely rewarding to feel the autonomy to make things happen without the liaison of an industry player. It feels personal, and there is an element of trust that I would imagine is lost when the promoter, often someone who may as well be a peer or a friend, has to go through some representation in order to interact with you.

I think that the best way these kinds of things can happen for hardworking, talented people with extremely limited resources is if we support each other. Like the list I spent months compiling of every single venue and party in every single different city that I was even thinking of visiting on tour, I have sent that list to friends who were booking tours. And as I was planning mine, some friends or even people I hardly knew sent names of parties and promoters to me, shared their contacts or made introductions. I think that it's beautiful when people understand that they aren't sacrificing their own prospects by helping others. I don't think we should gatekeep our resources.

What I am really hoping to see as the world begins to open up again is more joint tours between small artists and friends. Before quarantine hit, some friends and I were trying to book a three- or four-project tour. We have all toured somewhat extensively over the past couple of years, and it felt empowering to know that we could pool our resources. Especially post-quarantine, where I feel an emergent sense of "what's the point?" over anything that doesn't feel 100% lacking of a larger design, approaching music as a cutthroat business venture just feels misguided to me. So on a very base level, as idealistic as it may be, I just like the idea of sharing resources as a small community and touring together with friends to play music out in the world, and to enjoy the process of touring and playing shows with people you care about.

What has changed during this quarantine time for you as an artist? As a person?

I don't know if I'm biased just because my perspective has shifted in this way, but things feel less contrived, in a way. Like people are existing more honestly—I mean, we have all had so much time to sit with ourselves in earnest. Or it's possible that I have just ran out of patience for a lot of things, probably a bit of both. But I feel this even in terms of the way people craft and present their work. I think people should just put out what they make, if they're proud of it and they want to. And not worry too much about curating things to seem a certain way or projecting an image, or at least not feel pressure to. I think that we should just be putting honest language into the world and being people, not characters. In my personal life, I think more than ever before, I value the people in my life, quality time, and wholesome activities, and I prioritize the people I care about much more than I used to.

Have you seen that kind of shift in your own work?

I think that was always what I was aiming to do, but I have definitely gone through periods of losing my personhood in workaholicism, where I would do more and more until I would collapse. I feel that I have learned to wield that impulse more responsibly, understanding how to take things more slowly and consider things like sustaining mental and physical health. Overall, I think quarantine taught me patience. And I really just want to put a lot of care and time into making the work that I want to make. With everything that's been happening and the time that we've had to think about it, I believe there is space for much more intention and balance.

QUALIATIK Recommends:

We Live in Public: Documentary about early internet pioneer Josh Harris whose work in the 90s was somehow lost to time. Precocious, if not Orwellian, perspective on human behavior and identity in the post-internet world, and voluntary sacrifice of privacy in the digital age.

Shuji Terayama Short Experimental Films (1964-79) DVD set, or any short film to be found online. NSFW.

The Hourglass Sanatorium: Polish surrealist film by Wojciech Has. "Phantasmagoric" reflections about the nature of time and death, auxiliary themes about the collective trauma of the Holocaust.

The entire Directors Label Series DVD set: Collections of music video and film work by Chris Cunningham, Spike Jonze, Mark Romanek, Michel Gondry, Anton Corbijn, Jonathan Glazer, and Stéphane Sednaoui. Nostalgic of MTV in the early 2000s, great to have on in the background and can watch countless times.

Outkast - Stankonia (2000).

Name

QUALIATIK

Vocation

Musician, neuroscientist

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