

On following your intuition



Musician and photographer Nick Zinner on why context is more important than genre, quieting your inner critic, and the value of focus.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2012 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#), [Focus](#).

Compared to Yeah Yeah Yeahs, I would describe your project *41 Strings* as classical, ambient, something like that. It makes me wonder: How do you cultivate musical practices in completely different genres?

In my head, I feel genre is over or irrelevant, but I never really think about that. Maybe I'll think about context. I was reading a little bit of that David Byrne book [*How Music Works*] where he was talking about context, and that really struck a...I can't really say struck a chord. That's so corny. But it hit a nerve. It really made sense to me. The music I listen to is probably only half, quote-unquote, rock music or guitar music, if even that. I think more about intention than genre.

41 Strings was written to be performed once for an event celebrating Earth Day. It was designed to be something emotionally dynamic and intense but simple, so everyone in the room and in the experience would feel a sort of instant familiarity with it just by it being comprised of cycles of simple repeating themes. I was telling someone else that I really wanted to make people cry and just really feel something in this moment, and just get people with volume and intensity from the amplified instruments.

Do your projects in different contexts happen simultaneously, or do you need to finish a project in one to focus on the other? Or is it a mix?

Unless I'm mixing multiple things, it's hard to focus my attention on multiple projects at the same time. I need to be at 100% in whatever the thing that I'm doing is at the moment. In the initial creation phase, it takes so much mental work and focus to arrive at the place of intention. To bounce in and out of that from different spheres is really challenging for me in that early phase or in the mid-phase.

It sounds like focus is a big part of your creative practice.

Yeah. It's not even something that's intentional, but it's just the way that it has to be for me. There's no relationship between focus and time for me. I feel like I can be highly focused and highly productive and inspired in seven minutes and get more done sometimes than after being focused for four hours.

You've also done soundtrack and scoring work. I'm curious how each of the different contexts that you work in might affect the others.

I feel like I pick something up from everything that applies to, if not the next project, then five projects down the line. It's all very accumulated knowledge and skills that indirectly informs the next one. I feel like working on *41 Strings* and thinking orchestrally with more grandiose gestures made its way, in some form, onto the Yeah Yeah Yeahs record that we did in 2013 [*Mosquito*. For example,] the end of that song, "Despair," just trying to achieve the same type of swell or aural excitement and just a little bit of grandiosity.

I feel there's sort of a relationship there. But in my brain, it's not as simple as, "Oh, because I did this, I learned how to do some weird counterpoint thing in this project, [and] I will do the exact same thing in the next one." It's not quite as black and white as that, but there are definitely a few neurons that are connected in my brain.

I'm talking to you on the day that Yeah Yeah Yeahs released their first new song in ages ["Spitting at the Edge of the World"], and you're simultaneously rolling out the 41 Strings vinyl release. I assume that means you're focusing on the business and promotional side of two different creative practices at once. Can you talk about the value of all the promotional work and extra labor that goes into any creative practice?

With both things, I don't like to do that much. I haven't done any press today for the Yeah Yeah Yeahs stuff, except an Instagram post. I wouldn't know how to promote myself in a way that a lot of my friends are kind of forced to do these days. But [my post] was more from personal excitement, because we've been sitting on this for a year, or we were working on it for a year and a half. It's kind of just a necessary part of the process, and you just hope for the best.

It's really funny having to talk about music that you make because, for me, [what it means] is very often not formulated in my brain. I pretty much go on all instinct or intuition. It's usually only at the interview or press stage where I have to think and take a second to verbalize the process or the intention.

With Yeah Yeah Yeahs, it's interesting to hear my bandmates talk about the process, intention, meaning, or objective with tracks that we've done, because we never talk about any of that stuff while we're doing it. We just do it and kind of do [whatever] feels right. But we never talk about it in a more clinical manner. It's really fascinating to hear. I learn something new every time.

How do you know what the intention is when you create?

A lot of it depends on who or what I'm collaborating with. It's really hard for me to do things on my own in a vacuum. I need direction and focus. I need either a collaborator or another person or some input or creative direction from a director or bandmate, or a musician, or a photographer or installation artist. I need some kind of back and forth or an image to look at. I always just need something, because if I'm just in a vacuum by myself, it's hard to make it to the finish line.

We're talking about this all in a music context, but you're also a photographer, which seems like a more solitary practice. Can you talk about how that differs from music? And I'm curious how you balance photography and music.

Yeah, that's true. They're totally different. My whole thing with photography is 100% documentary. That's true whether that's our band that, now, I have 20 years of photos of, or just some weird little moment that I pass on a street in a new place. Or just a friend at a certain moment in time, just standing there, doing nothing. Half of it with photography is just to be like, "I want to remember this," or, "There's something about this that is interesting or beautiful that I just want to keep or not forget."

Also, I have a really bad memory, which definitely is getting worse with age. It's nice to be constantly creating those reminders and almost editing my future memories as I'm going along. Sometimes I'll catch myself, if I have my camera on me, choosing not to take pictures of something because I'm fine with not remembering it. I've caught myself doing that a few times recently.

With Yeah Yeah Yeahs, or any band or project I'm doing, especially where I get to travel or just hang out with other people, having that documentation is amazing. I become even more thankful for it as time progresses. The further those moments recede, just to have proof and something tangible from whatever that time is feels meaningful.

How does the practice of creating a song differ from creating a photo, and what has one taught you about the other?

To slightly contradict what I was just saying, there's this piece of advice that my old photo teacher, Larry Fink, told me when I was in college, which was, "Shoot first, ask questions later." And to a certain degree with photo, it is good to just... if there's the slightest instinct, just get the shot. Don't think about if it's good or important. Just worry about all that stuff later. You can always delete it or throw it out.

I feel like that translates really well for music. For me, and for a lot of creators that I know, sometimes, if you sit down to do something and you question what you're doing, what it's for, or what you want to do, you end up just shooting yourself in the foot, and nothing gets done. In both cases, total openness and heavy experimentation are vital in the early stage.

How do you know when a song is done, and how do you know when you've gotten the perfect photograph?

In terms of photography, I've noticed that the older I get and the bigger my archive gets, it's really a moving target. Maybe this has to do with a context that's continuously changing, but sometimes, the photos that I think are going to be great are just total garbage, and then the inverse is totally true, too. I've noticed that some photos that I thought were garbage, upon looking at them, looking at the negative or JPEG, one year, thinking that it's garbage, I'll go back to it 10 years later and be like, "This is the greatest picture I've ever taken." Or it takes on a different spirit and becomes something that I find really moving or captivating.

That could be time, it could be sentimentality, it could be...the person in the photo died, or maybe that seemingly minuscule moment was actually really gentle and beautiful. Everything, at least in what I'm talking about, is always in flux, so you're looking for something that is going to be not necessarily great, but interesting in some way, consistently throughout time.

[Knowing when a song is done] is just an intuition thing. It's way too easy to overwork things now. I feel like it's done when it feels right, when it just has that "everything in its right place" feeling and you intuitively don't feel like something is missing. And then, if it's a collaboration, it's when that feeling is shared, and hopefully, you're working with people who you trust. I'm a firm believer in deadlines for that reason, because it is such a slippery slope that you can go down, just overworking things.

Sometimes, you think something is done, and maybe, there's this nagging voice that's questioning whether it's done or not. With a film soundtrack or something abstract, I'll just start muting tracks and taking shit out just to quiet that voice and see what's out there and whether it's really at its full potential. Very often, I've found by taking away the first two tracks that were done on whatever piece it is, then something really great can emerge, and that can feel just absolutely right. It really is the battle of trying to quiet the inner critic and trusting the intuition and inner voice that, whatever the piece is, it's complete and has arrived.

Nick Zinner Recommends:

[Ethiopian series](#), especially [Vol.21](#)

There's this really beautiful graphic novel called [Moonshadow](#) that I read when I was a kid but still regularly gift to friends .

[Balinese gamelan music](#), specifically [gong kebyar](#), the thrash metal of gamelan. I got to study it in Bali when I was in school and it really changed the way I think about music.

[The Tapping Solution](#). It's a bit new agey but this app has really helped me with some anxiety and sleep issues.

The world recently lost [Gabe Serbian](#), one of the greatest drummers to have ever lived. We had a hardcore band together called Head Wound City, but he's mostly known for being the drummer of The Locust. Every project he played on is incredible and defined by his drumming . A really fantastic kind of '70s soundtrack psych record he did with Luke Henshaw is called *variations in the key of the afterlife*, and I highly recommend listening to that. I miss him deeply.

[Name](#)

Nick Zinner

Vocation

musician and photographer

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