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On not being afraid to say "yes"

Musician and producer Camilo Lara on dealing with everyday setbacks, reframing success, what makes for a good collaboration, and approaching your work from a positive place.

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As told to Miriam Garcia, 2077 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Film](#), [Culture](#), [Collaboration](#), [Beginnings](#), [Inspiration](#), [Adversity](#), [Time management](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Independence](#), [Production](#).

Do you remember the first time that you sang for any of your music projects?

Yes, it was with my first punk band and I didn't feel comfortable at all. It was not a cool experience. I was terrible, I mean, I'm still terrible, but at that time I was worse and I think it took me a lot of time to get better. Years later, I started using my voice with effects and not as a song's central thing, and I guess when I started playing live, I realized it was very important for me to sing because it was kind of something that happened naturally on a live show, I know when I like to use my vocals and I'm not afraid to do some instrumental stuff as well.

You launched an independent record label and it eventually had to close. How did you first feel at that time?

My life was over. I was done. Do you remember this character [Webster](#) from the tv show with the same name? It's about this little kid on a sitcom and suddenly the sitcom got canceled and your life, your career ends when you're 12. So I felt like that. I felt nothing more important can come bigger than the label and the failure of having a label. I got really depressed and I had to find another day job, so I started working at Warner Music Group for a year and it was horrible. I felt miserable. I feel that I did not succeed in my mission in life. So I became part of the system again. I remember that as a very bitter moment of my life.

We almost never talk about that part. The failures and overcoming them, that success is not linear or a path to the top. How were you able to overcome that phase in your life?

With therapy [laughs]. Most of the time we experience failure. The success stories happen every once in a while. So I guess you get used to failure all the time. That's a normal thing. There are few careers in music history that only went up and up and up, but real life is more painful than that.

How would you define success?

Success for me would be a body of work that you can proudly show to people you care about. That's probably the only thing. You can have some projects that are more successful or make more money or less money, but in the

long-run success is to have these records that you don't feel ashamed of. Sometimes when I look back to my career I see some records I'm not proud of at all, and I hope in a few years I'm not ashamed of them anymore.

When you said that this is something that you realized only looking back, does this mean that you were not ashamed of the work you did when you released it?

When I release something it is always because I believe it is worthy. I mean you release music because you think it's the coolest, then you realize it's not the coolest.

How do you realize when something that you're working on is good or bad? Is it intuition or experience?

It's pure intuition. And later when I do mixing on songs that are not necessarily mine, I leave a couple of days to listen to them again and see if they still sound good and interesting. Sometimes as time passes, I listen to music I released and I say to myself "What was I thinking?" I guess your taste changes. And that's a fact. What I was passionate about four years ago might not be interesting to me anymore. You get old, but that's okay.

You've been in the music and entertainment industries for many years, and of course, things change—as you mentioned your taste changes, and people come and go. Are you someone that embraces change easily and adapts to the circumstances?

I do change, but I don't want to change because of the times. I hate the idea of being a big team of the times—like just using a certain drumbeat because everyone is using it. When trap music started, I never felt the urge to be a trap artist. I refused to because it's me and I don't like it, but I do think it's good to understand the times and to try to get something out of new ideas. If you live on what turns you on when you were growing up it's kind of boring, but at the same time, I don't want to be the grandpa doing Tiktok.

Your projects are extremely collaborative on different levels. What do you usually look for in your collaborators or in the people that participate in your projects?

Either I admire them, or I'm curious about them and about what they do, or I think they have something I don't have. Those are my three ideas of a perfect collaboration. Sometimes when I work with people—like with Graham Cox—I thought he had something I didn't have, and he's my idol. So our collaboration was fantastic. And some other people like Cuco, it was great to discover his music; I listened to him and he blew my mind, so we did a song together. Those three things are important for me when I work with collaborators. If I don't have one of those, I won't do it.

How do you know when a project you're working on or a song or an album is done? Are you able to let things go?

Some people just spend days and weeks and months and years on something until it's perfect. I have learned to let it go because I produce a lot in my studio. If I don't stop the next thing will be delayed. I'm practical when I'm producing. It's hard, but that's what a producer does. That's the main responsibility for a producer to do, to stop, to be the curator, and say, "This is ready." So I'm good at that and I should do it more often, but I like to keep stuff simple.

You worked on the film Coco as a music supervisor and you even had a cameo. How did you get involved with this project? Did you have any concerns about how the film was going to portray Mexican culture?

The director found me by Googling my music, and then he messaged me on Facebook. He said "Hi, I'm Lee Unkrich. It's not a prank. I'm the film director of Monsters Inc and Toy Story 2. I'm writing this script. You should come." And he sent me an invitation to go to the Pixar offices in San Francisco. So I took a flight and when I landed at San Francisco's airport, my phone rang. The first call was Money Mark and he told me that Adam from the Beastie Boys died. I was like, "Oh shit, this is so sad." So I hung up. I was super sad walking through customs. And the second call was someone from Pixar saying, "There's a gas leak in all the Pixar area. Your meeting's canceled and we have to reschedule probably in a few months." So I just turned back and I took the next flight

back to Mexico.

I thought it was a joke. I felt like shit. And many months passed I thought it was not going to happen. And so I was like, "Well, destiny is very cruel. And then many months passed and we had a meeting and it all happened. And in our first meeting with Lee, I told him that I hate movies with Mexican characters that are mice with a big sombrero. And they sleep outside of a bullfight Plaza and all the clichés of Mexican animation. He swore to me that it was going to be a portrait of Mexico as it is. So I got totally confident because Lee is not only a great animation director, he's a great director. He's a really, really, really solid director. So we started building something and it was beautiful. When we were recording the last piece of *Coco* was the day that Trump won. So I thought it was meant to be; it was a love letter to the moment. I have deep, deep gratitude for Pixar because they were so brave to do that in those hard moments.

You have years of experience. From working at a radio station to building your own label, working at EMI and Warner, releasing your own music, and even working with Pixar. Is there something that you have learned throughout the years that you consider essential or a mantra that helps you back to your center whenever you're in doubt, or when things are not working the way you were expecting?

Yes, they are two. When I don't know what to do, I consult Brian Eno's *Oblique Strategies*. That helps you unblock your creativity. And it's fantastic. The other one is I always try to approach things in a positive way. I think if you're going to sing a song, try to sing from a positive, not a negative place. And if you are trying to approach a project, always try to approach it with positivity. I always get blocked if I don't start on that point.

Can you elaborate on what you mean by approaching it with positivity?

In a positive message, instead of saying "no," I try to say always say, "yes." That's important for me. If you're going to do lyrics instead of building on a lyric that uses the "no"'s, try the lyric that uses the "yes." I always look for brightness and not darkness, and strength and not weakness. It's probably very abstract, but it helps and it's not that you end up doing happy music, it's that your creative beginning starts from a different point. It can be an obscure song or sad or whatever, but you have to start from light. Otherwise, you go to the other side very quickly.

And how were you able to learn all these things? Was it experienced or is it by practice?

Absolutely. That's years of starting with "no," then one day I was like , "I should start with 'yes,'" and I started with "yes" and it went way better. Once I was in Jamaica with a group of musicians and they took all this positivity very seriously, and they took it as a religion, and I thought that was very radical—but I think the initial ideas were amazing and great. The music always started from that area and that angle, and it's constructive not only in music, but in all art. I do think art needs to be constructive, even if the outcome of it's not happy, it needs to born from that.

How do you overcome doubting your talent or facing impostor syndrome?

Well, I'm a guy that was never great at guitar or bass. My instrument is sampling. My mom never believed that I was a musician, so I was an impostor. I mean I'm still an impostor. People don't think what I do is being a musician. But a few years ago I decided to focus on ideas, and that is more important and valuable to me, and I'm at peace with that. I'm more of a guy that goes for the ideas.

And where do ideas come from for you usually? Where do you look for inspiration?

That's an exercise. That's not inspiration. There are people who do paintings, and the more they paint, the more they do. Being creative is that: Every single day you have to do it and something will come. A bunch of what you do is not going to be good, but from time to time, you will have something that will be interesting to you.

Camilo Lara Recommends:

Best New Group: Viagra Boys "Stree Worms"

Movie: Midnight Cowboy by Diego Enrique Osorno

Book: The Life and Times of Malcolm McLaren by Paul Gorman

Album: Элен Зима/Желтый город (the electric Lenin)

Song: Prayers "La vida es un sueño"

Name

Camilo Lara

Vocation

Producer, recording artist, music supervisor

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courtesy of Camilo Lara