

On the power of self-reliance



Musician and songwriter Chelsea Jade discusses good anxiety versus bad anxiety, the desire to be respected and received by your peers, and expanding your skill set out of necessity.

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As told to Amanda Jane Robinson, 2263 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#), [Time management](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Success](#).

When writing songs, do you write pieces over time then fit them together, or do you sit down to write all in one go?

When I was making *Personal Best*, my last record, I was in a strange mode of being able to write a song in a day. I still am really proud of the record. I think it's very well-written, but my experience with *Soft Spot* has been quite different. I have been accumulating over time. It's something I always do, but I found it a lot more slow-going. Maybe the pandemic is a part of it, too, because a lot of the lyrics were written during the pandemic. I guess, life couldn't happen in-between writing sessions, and so there's no delineation between this time and the last time. The perspective hasn't shifted at all, which makes it harder to eke out the meaning. I think that's why I moved to New York, partly, because I wanted to experience those interludes more.

How did you maintain a writing discipline during the pandemic?

I tried to completely refocus my method into something I'd never done before. I started using the [Pomodoro method](#) and that worked for me, to some extent. I would just make calendars and day sheets. Every day sheet would be a different color so that it would catch my eye differently every day, it couldn't just linger as some unfinished list. Then I would do phone-a-friends, which I've never really done before, to try and discuss what I think I'm saying and see if it's clear to anybody else, or what their thoughts were. That was actually really helpful. I also think you need space from what you've written, and then you also need to record yourself singing the first version of it. When you're walking around listening to it, everything that is for some reason incorrect to you will continue to jump out at you. I think it's a really good method of editing and rewriting. I sometimes white-knuckle my original idea really hard. I've learned the art of sacrifice is vital to the health of the song or health of whatever the project is.

Are there other writing habits you find yourself fighting against?

My instinct is really not very strong, everything I do is due to concerted labor. Every time I sit down and write, I always think I'm going to try and write like this other thing I admire and work in their methodology somehow, but it derails. It absolutely derails. I think that the true north of songwriting is the second action of the song. Maybe the first action is a bassline, or a drum beat, or maybe it's a melody, or maybe it's a lyric, but the second action that you do is, to me, that's the god tier. Then you're just stumbling off the god tier for the rest of the time you're working on it.

How do you know when a song is finished?

Sometimes, it's when I feel so beyond the past due date in my mind that it's kind of like, this either is it, or

it just isn't anything. Or it's, frankly, when there's an intro, verse one, chorus, verse two, chorus to bridge, double chorus. I really can't overstate how valuable and wonderful I think the pop structure of a song is. You can play around with it, it's just a nice parameter.

How often do you think other music, and also what you're reading or watching, filters into what you're writing?

Always. Especially reading. I always just feel like I'm more equipped when I've been reading, because it's one of the only mediums that you can only experience alone.

You've won numerous awards over the years for your music videos, many of which have been collaborations with filmmaker Alexander Gandar. Often you're riffing on one extreme image—caressing a melting block of ice, blowing a high-velocity fan at your face, singing atop stilts. How do you translate a song into a visual concept?

I feel like my mind is quite often in a bit of a flurry and because of that—my taste reacts in the opposite and more elemental direction. Everything that I've done for a music video that seems like on one end of an extremity is simply because it's the most whole in itself idea that is very easy to understand. Like in "Superfan," scale was the concept. It's just a matter of minimalism, putting things in a very broad capacity for communication. I don't really include narrative because that, to me, is just detail, detail, detail, when what I want is single strokes. Also, because it's just putting myself into a situation, it seems like it won't harm anybody, and it challenges me.

What other parts of the process challenge you?

Every part. I think being understood is the challenge of any artist. I think that's why I keep going, because I really want to be received. It's an acceptance thing. The kernel of everything is like, "Don't you feel this way, too? How can we have this conversation, and how can I interest you in it?" Of course I love to have that stranger connection, but what I really want is just the respect of my peers.

Who do you consider your peers?

Often, I think of alternative comedians. When I think of who I hear the most nuance from and the most tenacity, I think of comedy as just such an elemental form—it's so exposing, but it's also so portable and so theatrical. I'd love to have all of those things said about me.

What is it about portability that is aspirational to you?

Being a musician, especially now, is a very cumbersome sport. Just physically, you have to be lifting a lot of equipment and negotiating travel, and negotiating a lot of luggage. If you're touring with someone as a support act, you have to really consider your real estate in the van. Something I admire about comedy is that it doesn't have to have any of that detritus. It's lightweight. It's very self-reliant. I really like that. I think I've tried, in my own way, to explore different scales of how my thing can be portable. The more portable you get as a musician, the more expansive your skills have to be.

By virtue of being an independent musician you have amassed an arsenal of self-taught skills across every part of the music business. Most recently you learned animation so you could animate your own music video. What aspects of the business would you like to be able to hand over to someone else and what do you think you'll always want a hand in?

I'd love to hand off administration. It is by necessity that I'm learning all these skills, but it's valuable because if I do come into those resources, I'll be able to speak the language that will, hopefully, propel whatever the project is into a healthier place. The perfect idea of collaboration, to me, is bringing in an idea you think is good, and then the other person one-upping you. I want to be outsmarted by everyone I work with.

You do a lot of collaboration and songwriting with other artists. How do you maintain your own sensibilities when

working with others?

When I'm working on somebody else's project, I feel completely in service to them. My concern flips to, "How do I synthesize this person's desires and also maintain a level of self-esteem that will allow me to remember what I know?" I think that's the balance.

Were your parents creative? Did they encourage your creativity growing up?

I think they were both incredibly creative in a very untapped way. I think I've always thought my mother had really strong sensibilities. She's got a critical eye. My dad quietly plays the guitar when no one's around, but he's hyper-smart. He has a really deft appreciation for what I consider good comedy. They were definitely supportive, because I would sit in a woman's basement once a week making porcelain dolls. Only my mother would seek that out for me. [laughs] My parents never pushed me to do anything, but they always helped to facilitate my exploring things. I did a lot of dance when I was growing up—tap, jazz, ballet, hip-hop, I did it all. Now that I think of it, that's a huge burden I put them through.

Then after high school you went to art school. What made you come back to music?

I was at art school for two years and all that time my best friends were at jazz school. I was just so envious that they were having this outlet for their musical selves. I tried to make my work about music. I was just immature so I couldn't hold both ideas in my head at once and so I took a year off to try music.

What impact do you think growing up in New Zealand had on you?

I think that New Zealand art is so specific, and for that reason it should be celebrated. The reason it's so specific is because it's pretty insular, at least when I last lived there, which was a while ago now. When I first started getting into music I would busk with my friend, Liz, at the mall on a Friday night and every song or every album that we came into contact with was so otherworldly to us because there wasn't a direct line to anything. It really did feel like you were discovering it and it felt rare. You never really got to humanize the experience because no one ever toured in New Zealand until pretty recently, and so art was magic.

What kind of art encapsulates New Zealand to you?

The Beths are so actualized as an original New Zealand voice. And Rose Matafeo, for sure.

How do you feel about your work once you're done? Is that relationship fraught for you?

No. I put all the fraught notions into the making of it, and then I marvel at the fact that there's a little parcel of magic. I definitely go through waves. If I feel very saturated with something I've been working on, I leave it for a long time. The other day, because I've had *Soft Spot* for a little while, I was on the train back from the ballet and I was like, "The best way to listen to anything is in motion, I've never listened to this record on a train, I wonder what it's like." I was surprised by the experience and I heard it in a different way, and I felt grateful for that.

Do you have an idea of people's reactions in your mind as you're writing?

I don't think I ever know how people will perceive anything. I think the only thing that keeps me aware of it is like, "What do I have anxiety about in this? Is it a good anxiety or is it a bad anxiety? Am I pushing myself to expose myself in a way that I haven't before?" In that way, I think that's a good type of anxiety. It's kind of giddy, a little bit mischievous or something. Or, "Am I lying?" That's a bad anxiety.

How do you define the success of a record?

I feel like it's so abstract for everyone right now. If the metric was touring, obviously we can't measure it by

that now. With touring, you could see the effect because there were people there, and that's success to me. Not even packed. Just people turning up. But if you can derive joy from just making the thing, that's really the ultimate success. Before I came to America, I would work mostly alone. Only when I got to LA, the pop industrial complex actually taught me how to have fun with music, with friends. That's when it's the most fun, working with people like Leroy Clampitt in a little studio behind a vape shop. I feel like success is leaving a room where you've just had this intimate, fun experience with a person, going home on the bus and listening to the thing you made that day. I'm unable to generate that type of euphoria on my own.

Chelsea Jade Recommends:

Keeping a few addresses committed to memory and a couple of stamped envelopes in your notebook. it really takes the sting out of a DMV queue to be writing a note to someone.

Calling your friends when they release something. My partner put out a record in the height of the pandemic so a lot of the majesty of release day boiled down to the phone calls from friends that came thru the car stereo as we took a drive around Los Angeles. I was really touched to overhear so much mutual respect and acknowledgment. Especially at time like this.

Cheap tickets to the ballet—I just moved to New York and I can't believe my luck having Lincoln center two trains away. Turns out there are a lot of above board ways to see theatre affordably. Linctix is one.

The brisket sandwich at Bu'cee's in Texas

Getting your drivers license. I just got mine at 32 and it felt like a graduation from a certain kind of shame and fear. plus I don't have to carry my passport around anymore.

Name

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Vocation

musician and songwriter

□

George Clarke