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As told to Max Freedman, 1987 words.

Tags: Music, Collaboration, Focus, Process.



# On giving your work time to rest

Musician and visual artist Dana Margolin (Porridge Radio) discusses cultivating spaces for separate creative practices, not worrying about how your work will be received, and the value of making something bad.

**Being a musician actively working in the industry and touring can be time-consuming and exhausting, and it can also make people associate you with just music and not anything else, but you're also a painter and a visual artist. How do you find the time and energy to tend to your visual art practice when you have so much music stuff happening?**

I'm obsessed with it. I'm really obsessed with making things. It's not so much about the visual art practice or the music practice or writing. All those things contribute to each other, and they feed into each other in a way that I rely on to make sense of my world and myself. When I don't do it, I end up getting really sad and frustrated.

When I get home from touring, if I have any time at home, I go to the studio. That's where I want to spend all my spare time. It makes me feel really good. I'm here now just spending the day. If I can work from anywhere, I'll work from here because it makes me feel good.

**Can you talk about what you need in a space for it to be somewhere you can create?**

I need it to be mine. I need it to be fun. I need there to be no pressure. I mean, I've got a beanbag [chair] on the floor. Sometimes I just come here, and I lie on the floor, and I don't do anything, and it's really good. I need a space where I can not have to make something because then that's when I want to do it. I also really love toys, and I love collecting stupid shit. I've got a toy snake. There's an octopus over here, and I've got books and a little diorama I made. My sister came by about an hour ago, and she took away about 10 big paintings.

I find it really nice to have stuff in the space because you start to cover the walls [with] your art. Especially when I was making the artwork for *Waterslide* in my old studio, the whole wall was covered in pictures of slides and staircases and diving boards, and then I'd cover it with all my pictures. I love that you can throw things into place and there's no real order. The order is what you create, and as long as you can do whatever you want and have no pressure to make anything good, for me, those are the key things that I need.

**It sounds like you're immersing yourself in your creativity with all this stuff on your walls and around you.**

Exactly. It's being able to be within it and have a dedicated space. I got my first studio space about two and a half years ago, and it completely transformed the way that I think about creativity because it allowed me to have a specific area where I go to do this thing, and it legitimizes it in a way. It also means that you are surrounded by other people who have their own creative practices. I've always assumed that you can't be an artist as your job, but when you surround yourself with people who are doing just that, you're like, "Oh, maybe I am allowed to do this. Maybe I'm not faking it. Maybe this is actually as important to me as it is important to all these people who I really respect."

**I want to rewind to when you mentioned your sister. I know she's directed some of your music videos, and I imagine that's nice because she's family, but I also imagine it could introduce the potential for creative disagreements that could bleed into your relationship. Can you talk about the balance between maintaining your close relationships and choosing the right collaborators?**

Creatively, I trust her more than I trust almost anyone else. I think she knows me really, really well, and she loves me so much and I love her so much. Being in a band, similarly, you are giving yourself. You are dedicating your entire creative practice to these people you work with, and you just have to hope for the best. In a way, with my sister, we know how to fight. We didn't have to learn how to fight as adults because we learned how to fight as children, and knowing how to fight with people is the key to any good relationship.

She was part of the process of me making the album. I sent her mixes, I sent her paintings I was doing, and she'd offer really good criticism and supportive feedback. She came up with these ideas for the videos and pitched them, and she completely conceptualized everything and directed everything. [It] made me see her in a new light where I could respect her [even more] as an artist.

**You create the visuals that go on the album covers and the tour posters. What do you think are the benefits and challenges of using one of your creative forms to power the other?**

It's really useful for me because...sometimes, I just can't write a song. Sometimes, I don't want to write a song. In that time, I can write something in my notebook, or I can draw a picture, and I can use these other spaces to allow the other thing to get some rest, which then means that it can come back. I think that the most important thing you can do when you are making anything is to give it time to rest, take the pressure off it, and be occupied with something else. I feel very lucky that I can use the space for visual art or writing as a way to take the pressure off the other thing. It allows it to develop at its own pace without all this pressure on it.

**I'm curious how having a separate studio space ties into the concept of letting something rest so that you can come back to it.**

I can go to my studio, I can work on something, and at the end of the day, I can leave. I know that the space is still going to be there when I come back the next day, or if I go on tour, I know that I can come back and I've got my bedroom. Most of the music, I write at home, but all the art I make is here. ... I just finished reading *A Room of One's Own*, and I was like, "It's true." As soon as you have a space where you can create, that's what allows you to create. You could be doing it anyway, but it facilitates the time and the energy.

**I'm curious why you have two different spaces for two different art forms.**

I tend to write music at moments that don't really lend themselves to being in this space. It's really hard to say why I write songs...a song lands on me often, whereas the art, I have to do with intent. A song can land on me when I've woken up in the morning, and then you have to get it down before you get anywhere else. Whereas the painting and drawing and writing all seem to be considered in a slightly different way.

Visual art was a way to explore something that wasn't music when music was the thing people were paying attention to. ... I still use it as a space where I can create anything I want. One of my main important things, when I'm going into making anything, is that it's allowed to be bad. When the band started to have a bit more attention, I got to use the art as a space to make bad shit and enjoy it.

**What you said about the band getting big at some point makes me wonder, Porridge Radio started getting a lot of attention in early 2020, and obviously, that meant you couldn't go on the U.S. tour you'd planned. How did having that sidelined affect your creative practices?**

It was an amazing opportunity to spend two years in my studio making artwork, making [*Waterslide*]. It was time to spend with my family, time to spend resting, looking after myself, trying to figure out where my boundaries are, what I need, and what I'm doing. I mean, I'm still figuring out a lot of that stuff, but if I hadn't had time at home, I don't know how I would've gotten through that year, because I wasn't ready for it in a way I think I now am. I was lucky to be able to make more things. I'm always ready to record the next album. I'm always waiting to be able to do that, and touring is the thing that allows the rest of what I want to make happen.

**What draws me to your music is that it all feels like a big group shout-along of relatively simple phrases that become so meaningful by you repeating them progressively more loudly and more intensely—I feel like Porridge Radio has very distinct creative characteristics. There are clearly things you lean into. Are there things you have to lean away from?**

I actually try and lean away from the things that I quite obviously lean into, and I try to stop myself from leaning into the same patterns that are quite easy to lean into when you're writing a song. I challenge myself to write on a keyboard instead of a guitar to try and do something differently or write from a gentler perspective. Trying to challenge myself to not just do the same thing that I very instinctively want to do when I'm writing.

**Does that goal become tougher when you start getting critical acclaim for doing the thing you're trying not to do?**

Hard to say. I don't worry about what people are going to think of a song because I like to write a song for myself. When I write a song, I don't know if it's going to be something that I end up sharing. I write a lot over a long period of time, and a lot of the songs become something, and a lot of them don't. Because of that, I don't overthink whether people are going to want something. When I do think about it and I do freak out about whether it's what people want, I just have to remember that you can do anything. It doesn't matter.

**How do you know when a song is done, when it should go onto a Porridge Radio album?**

I just know. It's like when you listen to music, you don't really know why it's good, but you just know it's good. Sometimes, I just write a song, I'm like, "Oh yeah, that's the song. That's the one." Sometimes, I don't know. A lot of the time, I will share [a song] with my bandmates and I'll say, "I wrote a song and I don't like it." And they'll say, "Oh, I really love it." And then it will become something. Sometimes, I'll say, "I really like it." And someone will be like, "Oh, I don't really get it." I think there's space to not know, and also, sometimes, you just know.

Dana Margolin Recommends:

I recommend getting into bed with a hot water bottle and reading your book.

I recommend sitting down anywhere, looking around, and then staring into the middle distance for a while.

I recommend frying up some ginger chilli garlic coconut oil and frying some rice and adding peas and an egg or two.

I recommend writing down what you're feeling and not showing anybody.

I recommend calling someone who loves you.

Name

Dana Margolin

Vocation

musician and visual artist


Fact


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Matilda Hill-Jenkins

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