

On getting out of the way of yourself



Musician and visual artist Devendra Banhart discusses humility, collaboration, and letting fear guide you.

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As told to Jeffrey Silverstein, 2449 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Art](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#).

Many people who make creative work cite the importance of getting out of your own way. Have you developed healthy ways to do this over time?

Like the journey of every artist, your best work is when you get out of the way. Developing healthy ways to do this is a huge challenge because unfortunately, but also for our benefit, the most unhealthy ways are fucking awesome. The fast track. They're seductive because they're effective. There's stuff you can do that's going to bite you in the ass later on, but gets you out of the way fast. It's a subjective journey, whatever that unhealthy or healthy thing is. Through the journey, hopefully you become grateful for getting to a place where you find healthy ways. It's still quite mysterious to me. How do I get out of the way?

Intention is important. Why are you making this piece? At the same time, I'm so into being carried away by pure mystery. Sometimes you know what kind of song it is, you know what you want to say. You even know how you want it to sound, and can hear and see it. The rest of it is making that manifest. That's one version. Then the other is, I'm going to fumble in the dark until I find the switch.

So often there is fear at play, too.

Fear, of course, can fully freeze us, assault and petrify us. Fear can also be where all the good stuff is. The most vulnerable stuff is the most beautiful to share. That's our challenge. People can sense that. For me, it's an attitude that is helpful because it'll never go away. I'll never not be afraid. For the rest of my life, I'm going to be afraid. Can I look at it as this psychopomp, this person that can take me over to a place where I'm moving towards something like healing. Or it can be something that keeps me from ever considering expanding. I'll never write another good song if I don't let fear guide me. It's weird. We don't hear it. We hear not to be guided by fear, but it can be an incredible guide.

You've always struck me as unafraid.

It's been a lifetime of getting to a place where I don't think my work is the most important in the world and I don't think it's the most valueless, unimportant work either. You stop getting in that zone. Your work is meant to be shared. Beyond that, it's not up to you anymore. That's what I mean by engine of propulsion. I'm not making work for the byproducts of having made that work, which could be tremendous rejection and horrible reviews, which I've received. Or it could be accolades and amazing praise. Anyone's complementary expression towards you is wonderful. But really it's them, you facilitated a beautiful feeling in them. They're just expressing that. It's not actually about you.

It's much harder to deal with 'this is shit, man, you should give up'. That hurts so bad. They haven't worked out

their shit and are dumping theirs on you in a weird way. Most of the time we're cruel because people have been cruel to us as opposed to trying to avoid being cruel because it feels so bad.

It's not that the rejection didn't mean anything or didn't hurt. I joke around and say, "Yeah, I just annoyed people until somebody finally let me play a show." There's some truth to that. I actually sat in front of the venue on the Seine in Paris with a guitar. I was just playing, not loud. I didn't know what else to do. I didn't have an in. I didn't know anybody on a label.

I was like, well, this is a venue. I'm going to sit nearby, dangling my feet off the Seine, and I'm going to play my songs. Eventually the booker actually did walk by me and go, "You know what? The opening band canceled. Do you want to just play?" I had to do that for days, sit there for eight hours every day. Not even imagining that could happen.

That was my only strategy to somehow get in. The rejection came when I started to get addresses for labels. Then I'd go to a record store, look at the back of the label and start sending CDs and cassettes. No one's into it, it doesn't feel good. I've felt that with the art world too, going around with my portfolio, my paintings. No, not interested. I don't keep going because I think oh, my shit's so good. You just don't see it. You just have some sense that there is a space where you fit.

You describe your visual and music practices as separate portals. What sets them apart?

Songwriting is heavy for me. I'm working out that fear. What am I afraid of sharing? What am I afraid of singing? What is the secret that I'm keeping even to myself? Those are roadmaps, guiding lights. What's terrifying? What's uncomfortable? What a heavy trip to lay on someone. I don't want to do that. How would I sing this in a way that isn't some heavy trip? I have a therapist and a spiritual practice. That's where you lay things out. They're going to come out in your art without a doubt. Even if you're the person that paints one dot in the center of the canvas, somehow you're working something out.

I'm working with words and melodies. I know the material is fear-based. Fear-based, trauma-based, pain-based and of course, love-based. We get to a place where we can share it. It's an emotional exchange. Humor really helps, but it's still a serious process. After a day of writing, recording, or working out the tune, I go into the painting studio to balance it out. I start drawing dicks and tits. Big things and big snot coming out of a nose or a foot stepping on a dick, doing that for hours. The whole day I'm cracking up. Pure adolescence, just letting go. That's how it's been with the last few records. I'm taking it so seriously that I need an outlet that's more playful. That's shifting now. I want to approach at least some of a new body of songs with that playfulness. Maybe a song about an egg as the main person.

It's also a natural thing. Once you finish an album, you're so excited to do the complete opposite of whatever that record was about. Rarely are you ready to use the same instruments, same themes, same chords. You want a new approach, something exciting. Getting out of the way also means being taken by inspiration and curiosity. You get out of the way and put curiosity in the driver's seat.

You've had a handful of long-term collaborative partners. What's allowed for this longevity?

When you're around people that you admire, respect, and look up to, we want to impress them. It helps us. It sharpens us. This applies to any friendship or partnership in our lives. These people challenge us by being so inspiring. We're not complacent in those kinds of relationships.

Writing is so solitary. Andy Cabic (Vetiver) is one of the few people where we can get together, have a conversation with instruments, and for some reason, we're not mortified at the embarrassment of writing a song in front of another person. It is embarrassing, the amount of stuff that you have to go through in order to get to the good stuff.

When you've got a few friends you can talk about writing songs with, it's so valuable. You're speaking a particular language that you don't speak with everyone. It just feels like I'm part of something, part of a

community. Other than that, it's a lonely, solitary thing. In the words of Sigrid Nunez, every writer walks around with a banner that just says loneliness. I love that line, it's true.

What's different when working with someone you have personal history with vs only knowing one another via your work?

All of it has its own novelty. It's all exotic to me because 90% of my work is done alone. Andy will say "Yeah, I went down to LA and met with this songwriter. I didn't know him. My manager put it together and we just got in the room." To me, that's incredible. It's exotic, taboo. I should definitely challenge myself, try that out.

Do you keep routines for creative work?

I tend to put demands on myself. In my mind, I should finish a record every day. This is madness. That's totally unrealistic and very cruel. What I can do is write one line every day so that discipline is maintained even in the smallest bit. The more we're away from it, for me, this chasm starts to grow. Then I'll look, and it's so big and I'm terrified of it. The idea of picking up the guitar, the pen or the paintbrush becomes terrifying. That's a real thing that can happen to me if I spend too much time.

If I give it space, then I'm excited to get back to it. Typically, it's a night or two. If you let too much time go past, we'll find excuses to never do it again. It's scary when you start saying "I'll get to that when I have time" or "if only." There's a million if onlys, and there's never any time. I've never had time. Those are the things to watch out for that consume me. I figured out how to make sure there is one little drop, just one line. Playing guitar for a moment. There's a feeling of, okay, I'm still in touch with this thing. As I get older, it becomes scarier. It isn't like I understand music. I don't understand. I thought at this age, I would totally get it, that I'd understand music fully. The guitar? Every time I play it is like, what are you? What is this thing?

How does clothing impact confidence on stage?

I'm very sensitive to that. I think everyone is. Wearing something you don't feel comfortable in affects how you're dealing with the world. It affects how you think about yourself. It's so powerful. I wonder if some people could give a shit and don't notice it, truly aren't affected by it. I hope there's some people that could care less. That's awesome, I love it. I'm not one of those people, but you said confident. It's funny, this concept of honest humility.

Genuine humility comes from compassion and self-love. You're not measuring yourself up to the rest of the world. It's like the wave that sees the big wave and goes, ah, I wish I was that big wave. Then sees the little one and goes, aha, I'm bigger than you. Always measuring yourself up. True humility is an expression of knowing you're part of the ocean, not the wave. Confidence is different from arrogance, but sometimes they look similar. You see someone playing a show and it's an arrogant trip, we can tell. They're doing things that look confident, but in fact it's arrogance. Confidence is what we're trying to cultivate.

We just did a tour with Hayden Pedigo. Hayden talks about stage fright every night. His hands are shaking, he's sweating, he can barely get on stage. He still struggles with it, but he gets on stage and he makes that point. If anybody else feels like, how do people do this? He's showing you that you just do it, but it's still terrifying and you do it until it's not so scary. Talking about being frightened on stage makes him the most courageous person I've ever seen play. That's confidence cultivated from compassion. This is a total tangent, because that's not what you were asking me.

It's okay.

What we wear is going to affect us so much. When I think about this last tour, the moment I'm most proud of was the last show in Vancouver. I wore a brown, corduroy mini skirt and a cashmere sweater. My mini skirt felt sexy. I could feel the wind going up my butt crack. It felt great. Then the show's over. I take off my sweater. Then it's like, oh shit, people are still there, let's play another song. I played in just the mini skirt, no shirt, and was

basically naked. It was so fucking fun. I don't even know why that felt so good. Maybe it's that childlike play. Here I am, that's it. I'm naked in front of y'all and I'm jumping around. A wild experience that certainly was a little frightening, too.

Devendra Banhart Recommends:

Hoarders by Kate Durbin – This is one of the most interesting collection of poems i've read in a long time. It's an incredibly dynamic read, shifting between the intimate and clearly downplayed admissions of the "Hoarders" and the crystal clear poetic scrutinizations of Durbin make for an incredibly unique and dynamic read. I no joke wept and laughed out loud to many of these, totally brilliant. (I gotta give Cate Le Bon credit for seeing it and knowing I would love it!)

Unseen Beings by Erik Jampa Andersson – This is one of those books I want everyone to read and at the same time don't want to share with anyone ! It's so special...A reminder that I'm not insane when I talk to trees...

Kate by Kate Berlant – There's a few days left of its run at the Pasadena Playhouse, get a ticket NOW, or wait till it tours it again, in the meantime, PRAY that it does! This is easily the best play (is it a play? It's certainly a play...but it's also so much MORE!!!) I have ever seen. Truly.

Pharoah by Pharoah Sanders – I've had to listen to this on Youtube for years as it just hasn't been available. Thank you, Luaka Bop, for this much deserved and needed reissue. I listen to Harvest Time on repeat for hours and hours.... extremely inspiring.

Sylvester - Private Recordings August 1970 – A tender and oh so romantic collection of the legendary Sylvester singing classic show tunes. Strikingly intimate. Every time I put this on, I think someone is at the door but it's just Sylvesters foot tapping to the music...a must for fans of sentimental elegance and peacock feathers.

Name

Devendra Banhart

Vocation

musician and visual artist

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Dana Trippe