

On staying true to yourself across all your creative outlets



Musician and visual artist Jess Viscius discusses always remaining curious, making creative work with a family member, and finding joy in what you do.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2312 words.

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You work as a musician and visual artist. How do the processes behind each of your creative outlets differ and overlap?

I went to school for graphic design, and I've always been a visual person. Being a visual person, I also see music in a very visual way. When I'm writing a song, I see songs as little paintings.

When I'm making art, [I've] noticed that [I've] had the same visual themes throughout. So if I'm making visual art... I'll draw something that resonates with my music. [For] this current [Bnny] album that I made [Everything], the main thing is grief. And when I'm drawing, even though I'm not necessarily thinking about it, the themes that come out are related to that.

If you're creating music and visual art and anything else on the same day, how do you give them all the care they deserve?

I [don't] try to box them in silos, because I'm generally an unfocused person. I really need to be in the right space-headspace and literal space—where I can focus on what I'm doing. And it's really hard for me to work on two different projects on the same day. I need to devote one week to making art, and another week to making music. It's not like I'm just vacillating between the two regularly.

Why do you work that way?

I've always had trouble focusing, but one thing I like about when I work on art is [that] I find myself. It's one of the only instances where [I'm] fully focused and my mind is clear. The other day, I was drawing, and I was having a bad day, and I was just in this terrible mood. And as I was drawing, I noticed I was humming this comically happy song. And I was just like, "Oh wow, drawing has put me at ease, and subconsciously, there's something in me that's happy right now. I'm able to enjoy this."

It's a good thing you're enjoying it because, I'm curious, with the number of creative things you do—between foraging mushrooms, which I think can be considered a form of creativity, and making music and doing everything you do with your sister Alexa - does anything ever start to feel too much like a day job, or does the spark never go away?

I think that the spark does go away, but you just have to find joy in what you're doing. At a certain point, it is a job. But I feel incredibly grateful that I'm even able to release this album, because it's been such a long time coming.

When you're being creative, do you ever consciously notice that it's starting to feel like work, and if you do, what do you do to address that?

Well, I think that the true joy in creativity for me is ... sitting at home, in my bedroom with my guitar, just getting in touch with this side of myself. And that's why I'm doing this. And then, when it comes to having to make social media posts, that's when it starts to feel a little soul-crushing, but you have to take the good with the bad, and it's all one thing. I think that for some people, you don't need to necessarily focus on the business side of it so much, but as a new artist, it's just part of it. And sometimes, it's hard to reconcile with, and I wish I could just be making music in my bedroom.

You mentioned your guitar. I believe the story goes that someone left a guitar at your apartment one time and you just started playing it and became a musician. How do you just look at something and see it as something you can use to be creative?

It was my sister's guitar, and she had halfhearted[ly] taken lessons in high school. And for some reason... [the guitar] ended up at my apartment. [At the time], I was going through this period in my life where I felt very lost. And I had been making visual art before then, but it just wasn't resonating with me in the same way. And then the guitar was there, and I just picked it up and I was just so bored, I taught myself a few bars.

You only really need to learn a few bars to be a songwriter, [in my opinion]. It just kind of evolved naturally. And then from there, I got my own guitar, which I like much better.

Do you often look at your creativity as something to rescue you when you're feeling lost?

Yeah. I think I do. I think that just the act of being creative is healing. For me, it's like getting out the little demons inside me and bringing them to the surface, and I'm like, "Oh, wow." Sometimes I'm in that camp of songwriters [for] who[m] it's very free-association, and I'm not really thinking about the lyrics, but they just come to the surface. And so sometimes, I'm surprised by what's on my mind, because there's something in me guarding that. And then, when I sit down to play guitar, I can access that part of myself that's more closed off from the world.

That makes me wonder, do you go into songwriting with a curiosity about yourself or the world?

I think that [my songwriting process is] sort of like, if you ever are just journaling and not thinking about what you're writing, and you're surprised by what you've written down or what's actually on your mind. So I'd say yeah.

Since you do so many creative things, how much does curiosity drive you to keep your toes dipped in so many pools?

I feel like curiosity is super important. Have you ever read *The Artist's Way*? It's this book about a creative path and finding your artist self. Your question made me think of that because there's this part where [the author is] talking about going on an artist date with yourself, which is just...remaining curious about the world around you and things outside your art, and finding inspiration in the mundane. I think remaining curious is what keeps you young and happy. And I think it's super important. If you're not curious about something, then what are you actually...what are you doing?

I'm curious how working with your sister simultaneously fulfills your needs for creativity and family.

I'm so lucky to have Alexa, because we have this inherent closeness. And I think that being a creative person, it's so important to have that other person in your life who's fully supportive of you, because you can get lost and self-conscious, and to have Alexa by my side always is the reason I'm able to continue to be creative and make art and take risks.

My parents are still like, "What are you guys doing? When are you going to get real jobs?" It's funny, because I actually had a different background where I was working a nine-to-five job regularly. And now, I'm transitioning [to] where, now, it's more [artistic]. Everybody in my family is very concerned, but I think I'm doing well.

How did you realize that a non-nine-to-five lifestyle might be better for your creativity?

It's something I always struggled with. When I was at my nine-to-five, I just felt I was always out of place. I just felt this [wasn't] for me, that I was just scraping by. And then, I was laid off from my job, so it was sort of forced on me, but I couldn't have asked for anything better, because being laid off, I had some time off to think, and I was like, "Oh yeah, that was not my path." Now that I'm fully focused on my creative career, it feels like I'm genuinely living my truth.

Something you just said reminded me to ask you a question that came to mind earlier: What do you need in a space to get your creativity flowing?

Because I'm so unfocused, I need to clean my room first, and I need to have it be spotless. I need to have everything in its right place, and I need to be alone. I have trouble making art when other people are around, even when my roommates are home. I get really self-conscious and I'm like, "Oh, I hope nobody's listening to me." Even doing this interview, I left and came to my sister's studio because I just need to be alone. That's the most imperative [thing], and then just having a nice clean workspace where I can focus on the task at hand.

You're talking about working alone, but at the end of the day, with your band, there are other people there. Tell me about the process of bringing your creativity to other people.

Well, it's funny. For me, making music is a singular activity until I have to bring it to band practice and show the band. And even though these are my best friends, I still get self-conscious, and I'm like, "Oh, is somebody not paying attention when I'm playing the new song? Do they hate it?" I think you just have to come to terms with, "Okay, I can't just sit in my bedroom," and, I mean, I could be a loner, but the [music] is much fuller and [more] magical when the band comes in.

The early stages of creation are you and you alone, but when you bring these creations to the band, what lessons do you walk away with about your creativity for those future alone times?

Just to trust your gut. I feel, sometimes, I'm swayed in different ways when I bring a song to the band, and inevitably, I'm always happier if I trust my vision and what's in my heart.

It can be so complex once there [are] other people's opinions about how a song should sound or what this lead line should be. And listening back to something after practice, or even after we've fully recorded a song, [if] there's something I'm unhappy with, I'm like, "Ah, I should have just been honest with myself and with the band about what I wanted." And so that's something I'm learning, how to just trust myself.

As you talk about this, I'm realizing there's a really interesting divide that I hadn't thought of before speaking with you. In your music, you eventually work with other people. But from what I understand with the visual art, it's really just you. How does that make a difference?

I think it's much easier to work on visual art [alone], because it's just you. And because I'm not known as a visual artist per se, there's no pressure. I can just make art. It's a more joyful activity for me than making music, [though] I still love making music. Visual art is just my little safe place.

[Visual art is] my new hobby, and I cycle through hobbies in life. I like to challenge myself, and I get bored pretty easily.

Would your mushroom foraging and launching the vintage shop you run with Alexa count as moments when you've challenged yourself to get a new hobby?

I think so, yeah. Alexa and I have always been interested in the [vintage shop work]. It's something we've done for fun for years. And so during quarantine, especially when we were like, "Oh, we need to make some money," it just felt really natural. And it did feel like I was leaving behind working on graphic design stuff more and spending more time and energy working on this new venture.

We've been doing it for seven months now, and I'm already like, "Okay, what should I do next?" I think maybe that's a side effect of having a nine-to-five for so long, where I felt I was just in the box, and now I feel free, and I'm like, "Oh, the world is incredible, and I can do anything."

How do the vintage shop and your mushroom foraging, which are arguably less explicitly creative than music and visual art, tie into, enhance, or relate to the music and the art?

I think that it would be in the same way you were talking about earlier about remaining curious. I think it's helpful to have an interest in many things because, ultimately, that affects you subconsciously when you're writing a song. And it's good to not focus all your energy, for me, on one type of art, because that way, you can expand.

Jess Viscius Recommends:

100% Wool Socks: Spending \$20 on a single pair of socks is objectively ridiculous, but I see it as an investment. They last forever, are comfortable, magically keep your feet warm when it's cold out and cool when it's warm out... and best yet—your feet will never smell again.

Jim Jarmusch's *Night on Earth*: I escaped my quarantine reality by watching an ungodly amount of movies. I watched a lot of bad stuff (I just finished the Twilight saga), but one standout gem was Jim Jarmusch's *Night on Earth*. It follows the story of five cab drivers in five different cities. It's an intimate, sometimes humorous, sometimes sad journey of the surprising vulnerability of sharing a cab with a stranger at night.

I've been obsessively listening to Squirrel Flower's new album *Planet (i)* lately. I love her lyrics!

Behringer UV300 Ultra Vibrato Pedal: At \$25, this is one of the cheapest vibrato pedals out there but it sounds awesome. It makes several appearances on our album.

lemon juice: I think a little squeeze of lemon juice makes most food taste better. I especially like it on pasta.
chef's kiss

Name

Jess Viscius

Vocation

Musician, visual artist, vintage shop owner, mushroom forager

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