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As told to Jordana Nye, 2169 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Mental health.

On being kind to your future self

Musician Andy Shauf discusses developing a conceptual framing for your work, sobriety and creativity, and happy accidents.

Congrats on the release. I was wondering what is on your rider for this 2023 touring year?

There's sparkling water and beer for the drinkers and fruit, pretty much. We've been pretty into wafer cookies, so those are all also on it, Loacker Quadratinis. I'd recommend picking them up. The lemon is the best flavor.

Do you have a pre-show ritual of any sort?

On the last tour, I've been really drinking a lot of tea, like ginger lemon tea. So usually before the show, I eat right after soundcheck, and then I drink tea just right up until an hour before the show, and then I just sit around.

Do you drink a lot of water?

Yeah, I drink a lot of water, but then I have to cut it off an hour before so that I don't have to pee for the entire set.

On the note of drinking, I know that recently, you've reached 1,000 days without alcohol, which is very hard. Congratulations on that.

Thank you.

It's very inspiring. Have you noticed as far as writing process or just creating in general, has that changed any part of your process? Cutting it out completely?

Yeah, because it was, at a certain point, part of my creative process. I thought that drinking opened me up a little bit more to writing and it felt like the ideas would flow a little bit more naturally or quickly. After I stopped, it halted my writing, and I had a pretty decent amount of time feeling like I didn't really know if it was going to be the same again.

What I've found is that with substances and writing, it felt like it was easy, but I think it was more of a hindrance where now that I have a more clear head, I can navigate the creative process easier, even if it maybe doesn't feel like I'm getting on the same roll, or something that I would've felt like when I was intoxicated. It's more of a feeling of chipping away at it, where I'm able to work on something and I'm able to see what's working and what's not working. Maybe it's not as exciting as it was when it was a rollercoaster of like, "Will I finish this before I'm totally obliterated?"

But it's more like, you're making progress on something, and I treat it more as a long process now, where I chip away at it, and I set it down and I come back to it later and I chip away at it again. It's a different process these days, but it is more efficient, and I think I'm having better results.

Was it hard to cope with that realization? Were you relying on it in any way to get through your process, or was it a slow, easy let go, like, "I can do this without it?"

I was definitely relying on it, so it did feel like a struggle to get back into it after I quit it. But it's like almost everything—quitting drinking at first has felt daunting with socializing, or touring or really anything. You think, "How am I going to be able to do this without drinking or without that thing that was helping me?"

But as you get your footing again, you realize that there was a time when you could do all these things without drinking and without substances, and you just find yourself again. So it's felt like that, where it feels natural again. That's the tricky thing with alcohol and with whatever, it starts to make you think you can't do things without it, but you are of course able to, and at a higher level, because you're using your whole brain, and not just a slippery part of it.

How is it on tour when everybody else is doing their own thing, and are you like, "Oh, after the show, I'm going to be like, "Bye, guys. I'm going to go be by myself."

It depends. It's funny because touring with drinking, it's like after every show, I would drink, whether that's because we had a good show or because we had a bad show. It was just like, "The show's done. I'm going to have a drink." There are still people in the group that do that, and that's whatever, doesn't matter to me. But for me, it's good show or bad show, these days, I'm like, "I'm going to go to bed soon." It's treating it more like it's your day-to-day rather than every night's a party.

Because it is a job and it's a really cool job, but at the end of the show, I pack up my stuff, and then like any other day, it's like, "It's probably bedtime." When it's a big show and everybody's celebrating and stuff, it's nice to hang out and it's good. But day-to-day in life for me, I am keeping to myself, and it translates to the road as well now. At first, it was a big adjustment because I had always viewed it as like, we're out on the road and it's a constant celebration.

It's a challenging thing to do, waking up in a different place every day or driving to a different place every day, and it's very tiring. I think when you're treating it as a party, you're not realizing how badly it's just compounding the damage you're doing to your body. And by the end of the tour, you're so tired and it doesn't have to be that way. Just by pacing yourself, you can have a good time, the whole time, and get home and not need to catch up on sleep.

You can be kind to your future self.

Yeah, exactly.

What have you been listening to lately?

That is a good question. I don't really know if I've been listening too much. I listened to Frank Sinatra, *Wee Small Hours of the Morning*. I've listened to that record a few times. I really have been trying to read a lot, and that has been taking over my music listening time. Not that I really had music listening time before then, but if I'm listening to something, it's probably like I'm letting Spotify just roll. My friend sent me a playlist. That's what I've been listening to. And it's just Spotify, I listen to that JD Beck and Domi record.

I let Spotify just go off of that, and it's like new jazz, which is fun and it's not really active listening, but I've been getting a little bit more into jazz. I'm interested in those melodies.

How do you feel about album cycling, dropping singles before? I guess you've been doing it for a while, but do you ever have more control about dropping singles, or which ones? Do you pretty much have full creative control over your project, for this one?

Most of my albums are narratives, but in the past, the label's chosen or they've just decided which ones would work the best as singles. This time around with the story [on *Norm*], there were things that I didn't want to give away at first.

So I thought that doing it chronologically would be the best way to do it, just starting the first single as the first song, then the second song, then the third song. I think it worked out okay, probably the label would've done something differently. But it's just such a weird album, I didn't want to end up giving away the end of the record with the first singles.

It's such a different time for music and the way that people listen to music is so different, that dropping singles before the record is weird now.

I read up about how you have a disco album that you are in the works with, or were in the works?

I was working on a disco record before. It was the record that I was working on when COVID started. I kept working on it when everything shut down. It was just really not good. It wasn't going well. I was drinking a lot, writing that record, the disco record, and it was going in a really weird direction.

I was really forcing a story over these four-on-the-floor disco beats, and it was just really terrible. I stopped drinking and I scrapped that record at the same-ish time, because I took a step back and saw it for what it was and was like, "I need to do something else." But some of the songs I've repurposed. "Halloween Store" is a song from the Disco era. "Wasted On You" is just past the disco era. And then I've got another record with some guys from HOME, and I repurposed some stuff for that as well.

How do you piece your track transitions together? For the building of a concept record, do you put them together as you're still writing all of the songs and just figure out your track listing while you're writing, or do you at the end just re-sort everything?

It depends. On *Norm*, a lot of it is happy accidents where, when it would come to the end of the song, certain instruments, I would improvise something and just leave it how it was, and as I would continue, I would improvise something and layer it, harmonize it, and it would land in a certain spot. Once I had figured out what the order was going to be, I would see where it landed and where the next thing started.

Then I would tweak them, so that meant using the first half of the thing and then changing the second half so that it lands in a different spot, more appropriate to where the other one will start. A lot of the things landed correctly and I didn't have to rewrite them.

It's half lucky, and tweaking that lucky part. I really liked working on that, and it's fun to try and write things so they move naturally, from one thing into another. I almost had more fun writing those than the songs.

At a certain point in the writing, you have the sessions, but you also have the ordering session, cascading track to track, and it's like, something's not quite working, where you'll realize, "I want it to be a semi-tone down at the very end, so that it'll pick up correctly."

It's just going back and forth from the ordering session to the song sessions and tweaking something and bouncing it back to the ordering session and listening through. You have to have that zoomed out view of the record if you want things to work together in that way. So it's really helpful having it cascading through tracks as well, because then you can just bounce it and re-bounce it and put it in the session and put it back to where it was, and see how it works differently.

For this record, I read that you mainly start writing a song by sitting at the piano, but when you write on guitar, do you have a specific tuning that you always circle back to, and noodle around before you find chord progressions?

Yeah, with guitar, I don't really venture out of standard, it's mostly standard or drop D if I can't get something to work in standard. I don't really do other tunings, mostly because playing them live, it gets too complicated. It's like, "Am I going to be playing a million guitars or tuning this one?" But that's why I don't write a ton on guitar these days. I really have a hard time straying from the things that I normally do.

My hands will go to the same chords and reach for the same changes. I mean, my writing process is really…I don't know a ton of theory. I just write based on discovery and what I think sounds good. I mean, I have enough knowledge of theory to know what's going on, but I'm not writing from a place of like, "Oh, well, this will do this." And it's the same with the song transitions, where it's accidents and it's repeating accidents.

With piano, having everything laid out in front of me, I can clunk my hands until I play something that piques my interest melodically. Just having everything laid out left to right makes it easy for me to find what I'm hearing—and mix that with accidental cords and accidental notes.

Andy Shauf Recommends:

5 books

Evening in Paradise - Lucia Berlin

Cassandra at the Wedding - Dorothy Baker

If on a Winter's Night a Traveler - Italo Calvino

The White Book - Han Kang

Liberation Day - George Saunders

<u>Name</u>
Andy Shauf

<u>Vocation</u>
musician

<u>Fact</u>

Angela Lewis

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