

The Creative Independent is a vast resource of emotional and practical guidance. We publish Guides, Focuses, Tips, Interviews, and more to help you thrive as a creative person. Explore our website to find wisdom that speaks to you and your practice...

November 7, 2023 -

As told to Tiana Dueck, 3082 words.

Tags: Music, Production, Process, Inspiration, Collaboration, Anxiety.

On embracing imperfection and the unknown

Musician Astra King discusses pushing through self-doubt, discovering the sun, and how perfectionism slows things down. How are you doing now that your First Love EP is out?

I'm glad because I genuinely love these songs, but I also can't wait to take a break and not have to listen to them. Just binge other people's music, you know, have a life. I can't wait to be able to respond to a text with something other than, "I'm working on my ep." You know?

With the production of First Love, what were some of your challenges?

I got very impatient with the recording process. I wanted to grab the mic whenever and do whatever. I wasn't paying attention to certain things that became issues later. I had my computer set up in a weird way where every time I recorded it would have a different delay, so they were all off. I had to cut up all these takes and artificially create the natural timing of it. So, somehow, it took me almost a year just to edit these four songs. I just didn't know what I was doing.

I only figured out how to solve it once I started not sitting at my computer all the time. I would send it to my phone and actually go out in the yard and walk around and try to actually move while I'm listening. Somehow that added stimulation that helped my brain understand the timing more and not hyper fixate on things that weren't problems. I would do that for like a month or two and then that finally fixed it.

In those periods where you're not entirely sure what you're doing, how do you push through?

Every couple months I'll have a week where I feel like, "Oh, I'm actually good at what I do." But then it's back to not knowing what I'm doing. So I just embrace it. But also not trying to push past the limits of my ability too much. Ideally I can take time off to experiment and study, so that I don't have to think too hard when I go to create, and whatever happens happens. That's not been the case lately because of deadlines. There's just so much self-doubt when you're trying to do something and you can't even tell if you're perceiving it correctly.

I learned about your music through PC Music's Appleville. Do you remember where your head was at during that period when a bunch of people first heard your music?

I was working behind the scenes on Appleville a lot with the Remote Channels crew. I was very inexperienced, so I was mostly focused on not fucking that up. I wasn't thinking about my set until the last possible minute, which probably explains why I barely remember it. I was so exhausted. It's only in retrospect that I was able to think about it. I never thought people would like my set that much! It's kind of surprising.

I remember reading the chat during your set, everyone was obsessed with you. It was great. How did you meet A. G. Cook?

Before signing to PC, while still figuring out how to finish my music, I was ghost mixing and vocal editing for other people, and making K-pop covers on the side. Some of my close friends at the time were all big K-pop fans, and would not stop talking about it, so I involuntarily became pretty well informed. Meanwhile, I felt like I didn't know people as excited about the PC Music stuff I was listening to.

The first reasonable thing to do in my mind was a crossover experiment to see if I could eventually maybe

get K-pop fans into this funnel that would lead them to PC Music. I didn't know the audience would end up being A. G. Cook, though. Hilarious how that works.

One day I just commented something really random to one of his Instagram posts. He keeps saying now it was something really technical or specific but I cannot remember. I thought nothing of it. But either way I think he found it interesting that I looked like a YouTube K-pop cover channel making PCM-adjacent stuff, and reached out asking to hear more demos. So we sent stuff back and forth and rest is history.

Fast forward to 2020, before lockdown, we're sitting in his studio playing each other stuff we've been working on. He played me Silver, and mentioned something about a seven disc album. So I whipped up a Silver cover leading up to Appleville. I like to reference the artist that's hosting the show, you know?

Do you have any specific memories that shaped you as an artist since then?

The line in Silver that really rang true for me was "I work all night long and I'm OCD." It's a bit too true. But more recently, I've discovered the sun.

I always hated sunny days. It's too hot, it's too sweaty. But one day I accidentally went outside and I just like, got it. I was listening to Caroline Polachek's new album and there was a song on there called "Blood and Butter." One line says, "And what I want is to walk beside you. Needing nothing, but the sun that's in our eyes." I had to wake up early for a business call anyways, so I just decided to go outside and reenact the song. Something about it fixed my sleep.

I've never been able to sleep regularly, but something about admiring early morning sunlight, it just clicked. I usually get bored outside, but because I had the song playing, I started noticing insects, bees, and flowers. It was the first time I really noticed and appreciated these things. That early morning sunlight is magic to me. It cured my vampirism. The sun really helped me with finishing the EP edits because I was able to wake up with it, sit outside, and listen to the songs.

What about "hyperpop" first resonated with you?

One day a friend sent me a PC Music track from around 2014. Initially we weren't sure how we were feeling about it, since it was kind of strange. But it just clicked the next day, and we were both obsessed. I don't keep much track of what hyperpop is by definition, but the early PC music stuff specifically I was quite into—I was really into the do whatever you want spirit of it.

At the same time, it's also quite thoughtful music, and aware of all the elements. I find that it feels really relatable to people who make music because, in the music itself, you feel like you can look into the different layers of the work in progress and there's an incompleteness about it, but also a hyper completeness that's satisfying. I'm not saying that's all it is, that's just what spoke to me about it. This kind of music, whatever it is, kind of mirrors what I already naturally do, which is not finishing stuff, but now it's the aesthetic.

Do you have any other creative outlets apart from music?

I really enjoy crafting; like paper crafts, painting, crocheting...those low-stakes handmade things that have a lot of intent in them. I think it's a space where I can confront my perfectionism. I can just let it be a disaster and there's no consequence.

Also, I grew up playing the old *Sims* games with my sister. I'm quite into architecture and interior design. When I listen to music, I'll often have intrusive images of floor plans for some reason.

Ideally I want to make songs, go on tour, and then hide out in the tour bus and play *The Sims*. I like to play make-believe with my friends. My friends are really cool. Anything that has to do with making up stories and things which are kind of off and ugly in some way.

Your music video for "Make Me Cry" was really nice. Was it your first production for a music video?

"Make Me Cry" was my first proper Astra King music video shoot. It was really chaotic. We shot it in a day. It was my first time really directing a crew, which was scary because I'm used to doing everything by myself. But it turned out really well.

What helps you get comfortable in front of a camera?

I was worried that I would hate the video and not be able to watch it back because I mostly hate cameras, and I hate being in front of them. The only thing that helps for me is to infuse it, again, with some sort of ridiculous inside joke. So, if I'm laughing in the video at my own inside joke it neutralizes it somehow for me. It's why I'm probably always laughing in my videos. If I ever watch them back in the future, even if I think it's awful, at least I'll be reminded about how it was a funny moment, and that's beautiful to me.

It also helps me to think less about myself and more about the camera itself. Like the camera's an eye, and I like to play with how it perceives things. I'm just the subject that it's perceiving.

That's a freeing perspective. Does anxiety play a role in your practice?

I have extreme perfectionism, which I don't think actually makes the work better. It just makes it longer. I'll constantly think it's shit, but I'm also not really affected by it if people like it or not. Their opinion doesn't really persuade my own opinion of my music.

I'm in constant conflict with my own weird personal standards for what I think is acceptable, and it'll keep moving around into some grand territory that's way above my skill level, but I'm still expecting it.

I think I realized at some point though that my feelings about my songs change every day. It's already so unstable. It's not reliable. I realized at some point that my songs don't hate me. Even if I hate them, at the end of the day, I feel like they just wanna exist and have fun. So, it feels kind of mean to get the urge to berate myself and take it out on the songs. I may not be as skilled as I would ideally want to be, but they also didn't do anything wrong. I just have to get better at music and the songs are what they are.

I feel like the songs on *First Love* are my good friends now, so I'm at peace with them now. I can always love them in a way that transcends having to like everything about them.

Do you have any principles for your own practice?

I get really hung up on the vocal editing and mixing. Even if it's at the expense of the rest of the mix, I think it's really important for the vocals to feel real. Even though I also like it feeling very artificial and digital too at times; but still feel alive, like it really exists. I really enjoy that moment when my disbelief that I'm listening to a recording is just suspended for a moment.

Also, as a song draft gets worked on, I'll often dump a ton of new ideas toward the end to switch it up. Mostly because I get bored. I like to keep adding stuff to my songs. But the catch is whatever new musical DNA I introduce at the end, if I do keep it, I have to splice some of it back into earlier sections. It's really important to me to make sure that new ideas don't feel random. Otherwise I have a tendency to dump way too many ideas into a song and it can get bogged down.

How have challenges related to being social and your self-esteem influenced your creative processes?

I struggled for a long time with hating my body, my voice, like, everything. I'm fine with myself, but everything about my physical self just felt not right. Just very much ready to disown it.

Having to hear my voice playback, or perceive myself in general, would generate so much discomfort. On top of that, I always felt this pressure to sing or move in a certain way in order to be good enough or acceptable.

But ever since the pandemic, when I started working on this EP and throughout the whole process, I started becoming more interested in using my voice as an instrument and paying attention to literally just the sound of it.

So, I can focus on exploring my own identity in relation to my body in true first person. And I've found I actually do love extracting melodies out of this body. That incentivizes me to treat it well.

Understanding myself as a musical instrument or musical equipment makes me feel a lot better. It helps me bypass the loaded associations that come with being a person and I can focus more on the fascination of how things work and how it's perfect when it's just a natural phenomenon that I feel like I'm observing. It's magical to me. It doesn't feel impersonal either, rather, I think it feels more personalized to what I actually care about.

So maybe I'll feel more comfortable with having to be a person in a way more related to social stuff one day. But for now, this is kind of how I've dealt with it to get work done. I do feel like I'm in a pretty good place. I don't know if it's healthy or not, but I try not to think about myself as a person too much. It gets in the way. I'm just a natural phenomenon, and if you zoom in really close, everything looks really fascinating.

Getting down to just being grateful that you can be a musical instrument at all is really nice. Since you started on piano, what got you into more electronic music processes?

It was a natural progression because a lot of my early musical influences came from these edutainment CD-ROMs. I never had access to consoles. That's something I associated with other kids. They got to play all these games and I only had the family computer. I love the family computer. I had these educational computer games, their soundtracks had a distinctive style to them. Very liminal and strange.

It is a lot more effort to record live instruments. I honestly am not good enough at any live instrument to actually record it. There's something that feels so immediate about computer music. You pop open the computer and you compose right then and there. It feels like I'm playing the computer as an instrument.

As PC music shifts focus on archiving come 2024, what personal changes do you predict?

I'll likely still be involved in a couple PC archival projects. As for new stuff, I'll probably be independent for a while until something clicks. I'm not in a rush to find a label.

I love playing music live, it's one of my main motivations for completing and releasing my music. I want

to do shows. I'll try to get management so they can make sure I get my work done, and I'll just have to learn more about some of the business stuff. It's a big deal that PC is changing, but as for what I plan to do, I don't think it will be a huge shift.

I'm going to take a holiday, and then get my shit together health wise and workflow wise. I look forward to spending lots of time studying music and improving my skills for a bit before I dive back in. I'm quite interested in pop songwriting. I feel like I need to get better at writing hooks and stuff, so that would be fun. But I won't stop making music. Some people have been like, "Don't stop making music!" And it's like, of course not! That's not happening.

With electronic music and making music on a computer, how do you translate that into playing something live?

I actually put a lot of time into trying to figure out a live rig. I'm less interested in triggering samples and loops live. I mostly focus on vocals. I'll have a laptop with my vocal autotune effects, and it's hooked up to a controller so I can sing it and adjust the effects live. That's really fun, because you never know what you're gonna get.

My favorite part about performing live is that I don't know at what part my voice will crack or when I'll mess up, so it's like a surprise every night. I like to set it up in such a way that I give myself room to do whatever. It's really important to me that the vocals are actually live. I go to shows to hear people sing and mess up live. I love it when people mess up on stage, not in a mean way, I just like to hear it.

Definitely, the vocals often feel like the most live part of a show. Do you have any recipes to end off on for people who wanna make computer music, like, what are your digital ingredients?

A mental program I can't shut up about is Movable Do Solfège. It takes an upfront investment to learn but it's worth it if you like to analyze compositions. I use it to sing along to songs by ear.

I use Logic Pro X. The most important thing to me is using what DAW feels the most intuitive to your brain and knowing its keyboard commands. I think what matters more than what software you use is your seating position. My ergonomics were so bad that it hurt my back and I couldn't focus. I start to associate work with pain. So if possible, get an external monitor, do some research, and measure the distance between things so you're not craning your neck! Invest in ergonomics and health, and everything else follows.

Astra King Recommends:

Early morning sunlight exposure within an hour of waking, outdoors

Singing along to songs (lead melody, bass lines, any melodic instrument parts) using Movable Do solfège

Chin tucks during loading screens

Name

Astra King


Vocation

singer, songwriter, record producer

Fact

Related to Musician Astra King on embracing imperfection and the unknown:

 Caroline Polachek on making work that's useful

 Musician and Visual Artist Grouper on finding common experiences that are otherwise impossible

 Danny L Harle on making pop music

The Creative Independent is ad-free and published by [Kickstarter](#), PBC. See also: [Terms](#), [Privacy Policy](#).



↑