

On staying open to many potential futures



Musician Carolina Chauffe (hemlock) discusses the creative potential in having a scarcity of time, the community efforts that replace the industry's failures, and the inherent anti-capitalism of music.

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As told to Laura Brown, 2092 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Success](#), [Anxiety](#), [Independence](#), [Money](#).

In 2019 you started an annual project of writing a song a day for a month. With the release of the album november, you've now completed six albums representing six different months. Can you reflect on how the project has evolved?

Going into it in 2019, I had not envisioned that it was going to be something that I continued to do. It was just an experiment to see if I could do a song a day, and to use it as kind of an emotional processing ground. I enjoyed the challenge of it, and sort of the catharsis of it, that I figured doing that once a year would be something that would really benefit me and would be fun to incorporate into a longer-term goal or project.

As somebody who does function pretty well with deadlines, I'm typically pretty task avoidant. So both the deadline of having one month out of the year that is accounted for, and having a 24-hour period in which to write another song, it's been a really precious way to get in touch with my own creative process. I think it's gotten easier each year. It feels like a muscle that is getting stronger each time I come back around to it. It has allowed me to view what a song is, or what counts as a finished song. I think we can be our own worst enemy in terms of the boxes that we put ourselves in. To practice this sort of "first thought, best thought" process out of the relative scarcity of time has blasted open the balance of what I feel able to share, and has allowed me a lot of forgiveness and mercy with myself around following through an idea that maybe I don't like as much. I get feedback that there's someone who enjoys it anyway.

You outlined in your newsletter where you have physically been for all of the song-a-day months. How much of what you create is driven by what physically surrounds you?

Oh, goodness. I would say the majority of it. I feel like a huge part of my own process is wanting to feel very engaged with the present. The environment bleeds through either emotionally or physically. A lot of it is rooted in place because once you're opening yourself up in that way, the veil is so thin between where you end and what is around you begins.

And as much as I'm emphasizing rooting in the present, there's the part of the present that is an exploration of the past and the potential of the future. When I'm in a place like my hometown of Lafayette, writing songs is very informed by all the people that I've been in my time growing up there, and the baggage that I carry and the memories and nostalgia that I hold... In Louisiana, things feel swampy and humid and heavy and dense because the bulk of my life has been there. Whereas in the Pacific Northwest, when I was writing there in December, it was during lockdown—but there was also this expansive nature of being somewhere relatively new to me but so grandiose in a natural world way, like the scale of the ocean and the evergreen trees. At least for me when I hear an audio

clip, you can often tell what kind of room it was recorded in. I can hear videos that I took walking through the streets of Italy. There's a sound quality to each place, and there's also an emotional personality to each place. I feel like that all seeps into the work. The way that we see our environment is very tied to our emotional landscape. They're in this intrinsic relationship with each other. It feels like they're interwoven.

Can you talk about the communities you've found through music or otherwise?

Music has given me all of the most influential and inspiring relationships of my life. That comes in the form of collaborators and in bandmates and in organizers. I think there's a really large overlap in the DIY music community and the mutual aid community and direct action community—this through-line of an ethos of helping your neighbor. Being on tour for a year, I have now slept in someone else's bed or living room or backyard each night for over a straight year. That is a testament to a far-reaching community that is not confined by proximity or distance or time. It kind of denies the illusion of scarcity and opens its arms to the notion of abundance. I think the spaces that come with that community, and the shows that happen, are a form of resistance. It's often a catalyst for envisioning that free future that is easy to lose sight of, or that the odds are stacked against for in many other environments.

The community recognizes where the music industry falls short and fills in those gaps. What do you think the industry could do to better support artists?

It's a slippery slope to expect anything or ask anything of a structure that is so broken that it maybe just cannot provide those needs anymore. I feel like two core things that are just not being met right now are the need for transparency and the need for fair compensation. Those often go hand in hand: a willingness to talk about how much people are getting paid at any rung on the ladder anywhere, whether you're talking about venues or festivals or streaming or anywhere that music finds its home. I think doors are often kept closed to keep a larger conversation about equity out. We've reached a pretty dire point in this sort of clout economy where people are sometimes more willing—but at the same time less able—to get paid through exposure and are racking up debt. There's so much that's prohibited, especially for artists without budgets from a label or artists without preexisting family wealth or without the financial means. For me, it's even being able to know where that door is, let alone knock on it.

I think the more the music industry is in bed with the tech industry, the less possible it is going to be for any artist to feed themselves. I always find a way to flip it back around into heading deeper into community and into collaboration... Music is inherently anti-capitalist. It was not something that was ever meant to be tied to money. It's kind of this interesting catch-22 of people deserving to be compensated for what is their life's work with the knowledge that the music would persist without capitalism, without any of that structure at play at all. I think of that Gillian Welch song, "Everything is Free."

You are your own team, in many ways. How do you navigate the logistics of trying to book shows and survive?

I've found what works for me is to try to take myself out of the industry email threads and spaces as much as possible. I feel like I've broken up with playing in venues when I have the option to play in a non-traditional space, whether that's on a farm or in a living room or an art gallery—which does take extra effort because there's oftentimes not the gear or the infrastructure. It takes a willingness of a larger community and some extra elbow grease to make those things happen. But taking myself out of spaces that didn't feel like they were serving me, as someone who could not fall back on the name of a booking agent or a label to make people care about who I was or what it is that I'm doing, gave me a lot more validation and a lot more fulfillment.

My friend Pat now is helping co-manage Hemlock with me, and that has been a relief. I honestly have already seen cases in which someone will respond to Pat's email differently... It's resulted in a couple of opportunities that I've tried [to get] for years now. Sometimes it just takes one other name sending an email on your behalf, and people think that you've got credibility. I hope for a day when people don't have to be told what to care about in order to care. I think that's a crisis in the industry right now.

All you can really do is lean on the communities you find. You talk about having to make these short-notice asks

while you're on tour. How do you make peace with asking and how do you show gratitude for the people that show up for you?

It's been a practice of strengthening my own boundaries... And trusting other people to not offer more than they can give. I think I used to feel more like I was accruing debt: asking favors from people, them saying yes, and feeling like I had to find a way to give something in return in order to get out of the red and make that transaction fair. Now I understand it a lot differently. It's not itemized like that. Whether it's in the form of a song, or returning a place to sleep, or a meal to fill someone's belly, it's just this practice of us meeting each other's immediate needs without the expectation of it having to be immediately returned in the same degree.

I believe people want to provide and they want to show up for each other. I have a very generous definition of what art is or what creating is—I think it's just people wanting to be in communication with each other. I think that comes into your work a lot, in how direct or how immediate a lot of it is. It feels very reactive.

I think that's beautiful. We are often both the window and the mirror to one another... As much as I love the music and it's the vehicle through which I move through this very interesting journey, it feels more so the medium through which I am provided the hope to carry on. Music is just the shape of this thing that is ultimately a desire for and a practice of being a part of a community.

You've been on tour for the last year, but not just for your own project. When someone asks you to go on tour, do you have any hesitation or do you always want to find a way to join them?

It's not a blanket "yes". There's an amount of, "Do we know each other well enough? Do we at least have a feeling of resonance well enough to be able to cohabit in the same car for weeks or a month?" I've been lucky in that the people who've reached out to me in that capacity have often been some of my heroes, who are also dear friends. It all started with Little Mazarn in 2019. Lindsay cold-called me, I was in college outside of the cafeteria and asked me if I wanted to go to Canada. I'd never been on tour for more than a weekend before. And I was like, "Yeah, yeah, I think I can do that." I sort of never looked back after that. I think I trust the universe or the powers that be—the mysterious, kind of ethereal coincidence realm—to present me with opportunities that are on the path that I am already on and in the orbit that I've already found myself in. Passing through the open doors—the open portals, as it were—has given me a number of collaborators it's been a real honor to play music with, like Merce Lemon and Fran and Babehoven and Little Mazarn.

I can't really recall many times that I've had to say no. I think generally my schedule is wide open and like Play-Doh, where it's just ready to take the shape of the hand that's holding it at the moment. Sometimes it's a willingness, or it's a predisposition to malleability, of knowing that nothing is really set in stone. We can try to plan for the future, but the looser those plans are, the better we can move through them.

Carolina Chauffe recommends:

Driving in silence (for hours)

Brazilian limeade

Pens with green ink (felt-tip)

That Annie Dillard essay about the Total Eclipse

For every kitchen: an old, cheap, radio + tape player combo (used as often as possible)

Name

Carolina Chauffe

Vocation

independent musician (hemlock), multi-disciplinary artist

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