

On going through phases of creativity



Musician Caylie Runciman (Boyhood) discusses writing while your kid is at school, funding albums with grants, and the thrilling experience of first-time collaboration.

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As told to Lauren Spear, 1579 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Time management](#), [Money](#), [Day jobs](#).

What is it like to live in the beautiful rural setting of Mountain Grove, Ontario, where you run a creative retreat and studio?

I never lived in a huge city. I grew up in Belleville, [Ontario] and when I started coming out here, I would just sit in the grass and chill. I felt like something began to shift in me. Before moving out here, I lived in Ottawa, and felt slightly out of control and wasn't a settled person. The scenery helps me feel calm. Every once in a while, I enjoy leaving and being in the busy cuckoo stuff.

Every time I go to your place, I have a deep exhale moment. Do you find your environment conducive to making music and art?

The lack of distractions helps. That was something that I struggled with when I was living in Ottawa. As far as distracting cities go, it's pretty low on the list, but I was always somehow distracted anyway. I've definitely made more stuff out here. I also think having a kid has really put my ass in gear because I only have a couple of windows of opportunity when I can get work done.

When is that window?

Gem, my son, just started kindergarten, so I try to get work done when he's at school. When he first started, I struggled with my sense of purpose. I have this little bit of depression surrounding someone else looking after my baby and me being without him. Challenging myself to write while he's away has been a good exercise. There's always the 2 p.m. cutoff time, which gives me a sense of structure.

I know you produce your own music. Can you share your process?

I like to record using my 8-track. I'll have an idea, grab a guitar or bass, plug right in, and go. Usually, I hear a bass melody and start there. It's quick and easy, and I'm comfortable with it. After I have a structure, I will take those tracks into the big studio, add drums, and maybe redo vocals. My recording is my writing of the song.

Historically, I've worked alone, but I started recently collaborating with my buddy Phil Charbonneau. He has a project called [Scattered Clouds](#) and is a really lovely friend and a very interesting musician. I showed him some of the stuff I was working on, and he said, "You should come to my new studio space. I've got lots of vintage

synths and drum machines." I've wanted this clump of songs to be a bit more synthy, so I went to him and we added some LinnDrum, which is a drum machine that's really fancy and old. I'd never worked with others, so having someone support an idea was eye-opening. Experiencing someone else's enthusiasm is so much more fun.

Do you have specific people in your life from whom you ask for feedback?

I like showing songs to Gem. His interpretations and feelings are just so true and blunt. I also always go to my siblings, and that's really challenging because they never fake their opinions. I think I can often avoid sharing songs because they're so precious. It's a tough space.

Do you have any hopes and dreams for Gem's relationship with music?

He is a very musical little person, but I hope he does whatever it is he wants to do. I just want him to be free, happy—well, maybe not always happy—and confident. He wakes up in the morning and sits in bed, and literally for an hour straight, he'll sing songs stream-of-consciousness style. He's so into it and isn't even necessarily using words. And he's always had really good rhythm.

What's his band name again?

Night in the Dark.

How did he come up with that?

He just said it. He's the best. We record songs together sometimes. I plug him into the 8-track and he's made some really sweet stuff.

How long have you been working on this recent song clump?

It's been around two years. I just got into playing with the band I've been working with, and the live situation feels so good. Iggy Pop's album *The Idiot* was a significant reference for sounds. I'm hoping to record more songs with the live band in mind eventually. It's totally dependent on grant funding, but that would be a dream.

Do you feel supported by grants?

I am still figuring out how to tap into the grants situation. I've gotten a couple over the last few years and traveled to the UK, thanks to Canada Council. I release my records independently, though, and I tend to want to press vinyl, and am stubborn about how I want the songs to come across live, so I play with a band. For example, if there are two guitar parts, we need two guitars... and a synth, and all these expenses can add up quickly. It makes me feel delusional.

Wanting to have vinyl and play with a full band is so normal! The problem is the system, which makes us feel like even the basics are unattainable due to a lack of resources.

Yes, paying a band is really freaking hard when it's out of your pocket.

It's brutal —everyone's juggling side hustles. I know you're working, too. How do you manage to balance work and music?

My serving job is quite easy for me. I pour people pints; that's literally it. I feel quite independent in my job setting, and the owners respect me and allow me a lot of freedom in terms of giving me time off to go play shows, which is pretty sweet. That's the positive to working a serving job.

What parts of your life enter into your lyrics and songwriting?

I actually have many songs about my regulars at work now, and I like to reference mundane, workday things. This community of characters really means a lot to me. In the past, I felt like my writing had always been pretty depressing. I'll write when I'm in a rut, so much of my music is pretty sad-sack stuff. I feel a little bit self-conscious of that at this point in my life and don't always want to be like, "woe is me."

Caylie, your songs are compelling and don't sound "sad-sack." One of my favorite lyrics is, "If you're hearing this, I probably opened for you and I will again and again," from the song "In Public." Very relatable and funny to me.

Okay, well that's good. I try to make them a little bit funny too, because I want to take the piss out of my sad-sack self. That song I wrote when I was listening to a lot of Cate Le Bon. I just picked up a guitar, started playing this funny little riff, and that's how that started. I was wondering if I could maybe deliver this vocal in a croony way. That was my feeling as I sat and recorded in front of the wood stove on the floor.

Do you think your writing style has changed since Bad Mantras?

Definitely. I also read a lot more now and am a bit more conscious of putting words together. On *My Dread* I started to come out of my vague writing style. Before then, I'd always written lyrics in an intentionally vague style because I'm self-conscious. Making them less obvious made me feel safer. When it comes to writing lyrics, I go through phases. There's a certain point in the month when I start thinking differently—maybe it's when I'm ovulating. It's like words start entering my mind and I start thinking in a more creative space of my brain. I also took the Adrienne Lenker songwriting course this past winter, which was quite inspiring.

I took it, too! I feel like everyone and their dog took it. It was so beautiful. Did you like it?

Before I started, I felt all this pressure, and I was really stressed out about it. It ended up being so helpful that it became a discipline. I loved having two classes a week and having assignments.

You are planning on releasing music soon. What is your current mind state pre-release?

I still have this feeling that it is incomplete, which is a struggle. It's been so long now since I made it that I've listened to these few damn songs thousands of times. It's making me fucking crazy. The only thing I can do now is give them away.

Because you're not attached to a label, do you feel free to release things according to your own terms?

I feel lucky in that I make stuff when I want to, and there's literally no pressure from anyone aside from myself. At the same time, if anyone wanted to put my record out ever, sick.

Is there any question that you have always wanted to be asked and never have been?

I don't know. I like being asked how I am.

How are you, Caylie?

Now? I'm really great.

Caylie Runciman recommends:

Sniffing and lighting Waxmaya candles

(whilst)

Listening to the song "Rain" by Tones on Tail in the evening

(whilst)

Having a good stretch

(then)

Popping in on your neighbor

(and)

If you have the opportunity, holding a child's hand

Name

Caylie Runciman

Vocation

musician

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