

On finding support in your creative community



Musician Cedric Noel on what it means to write a song, balancing day jobs and creative work, and the importance of the people around you.

May 6, 2022 -

As told to Lauren Spear, 2043 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Collaboration](#), [Day jobs](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#).

Your last two releases, *Hang Time* and *Patterning* were both made over the course of many years. Can your writing process for those records?

Usually, when I write, I just sit down and then play a little show for myself. I can just feel when songs are coming and so, I just deal with it or sometimes I don't deal with it and then it goes away. But sometimes I know I need to deal with it and so I'll play something and then that's generally the song. If it's good, then I'll keep it and if it's not, then I put it away or I revisit it later. I tend to sit on them, which I did for *Patterning*. I think that I make records in stages now and I don't like to edit that much. To me, it feels maybe disingenuous to go back in because I'm like, "Don't lie to yourself, Cedric. Be honest with what you trying to say to yourself."

It seems to me you are always working on something and I know you have a huge catalogue of unreleased music. How do you maintain this output?

To me, it doesn't feel like it's that much. I don't know, a record is like eight to 14 songs, I guess.

It's a lot.

I think I just got a lot more relaxed about it because I'm like, "Okay, I can write a thing and if it's good then amazing and then if it's not then I'll just try to write another thing in a couple of months, or in a couple of weeks, or a couple of years." I don't think of every record as this precious thing that I made. I think that once I stopped thinking like that, I relaxed a lot more. And I was just like, "Yeah, I'm just making a record. It doesn't have to be like the statement of my life but it can just be something I'm making."

Because you recently signed to a record label, do you feel like that has changed the way that you interact with your own catalogue?

A little bit, unfortunately. I think that it's changed my schedule just because I have to wait a little bit more now to release. I don't like to think of record cycles, I just think of making records and then playing shows and those things are very independent of each other. I think in the '50s and maybe earlier, bands would tour a bunch of songs, get really tight, and then record. That seems to me more how I think about things. I understand that if you're a record label, you want your band or your performer to promote the record. I just think if I'm playing the same songs for two year, I would find that really unbearable. With the label, I was pretty honest and upfront about wanting to keep working in this way. I'm obviously going to be reasonable in terms of working with them and how to release stuff, but I was like, "I want to put out a record every year if that's what I have or I want to

put out multiple records a year if that's what I have." There isn't sequential progress to everything that I make. At the end of the day, I'm still working as I usually do. So, it hasn't really changed much of the results so far.

Has it ever been the case that you've released something and you're already tired of the songs?

Yes, that happens almost every time because I listen to the songs probably every day for a year. I've tried not playing the material live so they feel a bit fresh and also try different arrangements. I think I make records to explore something and so, once the record is done, I'm kind of like, "Okay, well then that thing that itch has been scratched." I get to discover more things about the songs by playing them live.

Can you explain the difference between working with yourself and collaborating with others?

I like to work alone because I hear everything. I probably don't hear all the parts, but I can hear what the song is trying to do. And so, it just feels easier to flesh that out myself and figure that out than having to try to get somebody else to understand what is in my head. It also feels like a place where I can be indulgent. When I'm working with other people, my ego is totally out of the picture.

How do you choose your collaborators?

I listen to a lot of music. If I'm home, which is most of the time, I'm listening to music. I'm also very nerdy so I look up who played on certain records, or who played what specific part. I'll research what drum someone used or what pedal and through that I gain a general idea of people's strengths. When I message somebody I'm like "Oh, this thing that you did on this record three years ago, I really liked maybe if you tried something like this, this would be helpful." Because it's nice to give people a bit of guidance. I also want people's personality on a song or on the record, so I choose based on that as well. Sometimes I know how to play a specific instrument, but I'll reach out to a friend to play it instead and ask them to do whatever they want.

Can you tell me how you find a balance between your musical career and your day job (working at Environment and Climate Change Canada?)

I don't know if I have like balance, I think it's like tough. It's exhausting to do two jobs at the same time, or I guess three. I consider it three because I have my day job, my own music, and then playing with other people. So, it is three jobs. I think one motivates the other though. I really like playing music, but sometimes I feel like it's a very selfish endeavor. And so, I feel like working in at Environment Canada feels like I'm trying to do some good in the world that is independent of me. Though music can feel very self-centered, at the same time, I think that being a musician and being a musical community feels very fulfilling and can be giving in other ways. So, I feel like I need one for the other generally so that I don't feel like I'm being useless.

Do you think you will continue to have multiple jobs throughout your life?

Yeah, unless I have a family or something, I'll probably have to slow down. But also, if I were just a musician, how would I retire? I think about that a lot.

For sure. It's not a very sustainable job.

Yeah. And just to have some security is important for me. But then at the same time, I think if I wasn't playing music, I would definitely go crazy. At this point, I really need it. But I think finding ways for me to not be doing everything at the same time would be useful because I think that's been the issue.

How do you avoid burnout?

I'm super burnt out. I don't have a good answer for that because I'm really burnt out. Honestly, it's hard to say no to things just because they're fun. But then sometimes it's hard to say no because you feel like you're

missing out on an opportunity, which is not as good of a reason. So, how to avoid burnout? Maybe do the things that feel most important. And remember that if somebody's asking you to do something that probably means that that person will ask you to do something again.

What part of being a musician gives you the most joy?

I think it's in playing live and playing with other people. There are moments where things coalesce at a live show. Let's say, either as a spectator or as a performer. It's hard to describe but there's always a point in a set or a point in a song where things are just coming together and you feel like you're there.

Like you feel present?

Present, but it's almost like a climax of a set or in the creation of a song. You feel warm from it. That's my favorite part. And so, it feels even better to be with other people because it makes me happy to see other people happy. I'm watching somebody perform and they're really good and happy, then I get pretty excited for them. And then in recording too, it's the same thing. When something you hear in your head is actually existing in the world it's like "Yeah, I did it. It happened, I figured it out."

I've seen you perform a number of times and I find you to be a very powerful performer. You are incredibly captivating and always seem very in the moment when you're out there. I'm wondering, what do you think about when you sing?

I'm usually just thinking about the next song, to be honest. I'm not as present as I would like to be. I believe I figured out how to make sure that it appears like I'm present, but I need to work better at actually being present. I'm always thinking about whether the show is feeling good, but then sometimes I'm just not thinking and it feels like a real release and that's really nice. There have been times where my mind is on mundane things and have to come out of autopilot and be like, "Whoa, okay. You're here. You're in front of people." But other times, I think of jokes or where to take a song, too. Because I don't play a song the same way twice, I often think things like, "Should I bring the dynamic of the song down right here? Did that even work? Is what I'm doing right now working? Do I feel like the people are engaged? Do I find this interesting?"

What is your relationship like with your singing voice?

I like my voice, so that's a big thing. I didn't like it when I first started singing at all, which I think is common. I think I wanted a very different voice than what I have. I'm not overly confident about a lot of stuff in life, but I always knew that I could sing. It doesn't make any sense like no one was like, "Oh, you're a good singer." I always felt like I could hear a note and then I could sing it. Right now, I think that I need to take more care of my voice and use it more regularly. But I think generally, it's like a healthy relationship with a lot of trust. I think my voice is settled.

Where do you find support?

[laughs] I don't have any support, I'm always on my own. No, I'm kidding. Pretty much from friends and the community. I think, talking to people or peers I guess, is what we would call each other, about what's going on in the music industry is a form of support. There's a lot of smoke and mirrors, a lot of secret paths, a lot of trap doors in the industry to expose so, I'm always down for a chat about that kind of stuff. To me, that feels like support because I can feel like somebody's being honest with me. But also, it keeps us all in check. Whenever I've not felt good about music, the thing that has brought me back is seeing a really good show. Seeing somebody have fun on stage reminds me of why I'm doing it. And that's always in like a community context. So, the community is the support.

Cedric Noel Recommends:

listening to Roberta Flack's version of "Do What You Gotta Do"

learning how to take 5-minute naps

drinking some Dandy Blend

listening to Salif Keita's album Folon

going to an osteopath

Name

Cedric Noel

Vocation

musician

□

Nick Schofield