

On working intuitively



Musician, composer, and producer Daniel Lopatin (Oneohtrix Point Never) discusses staying interested, properly archiving your ongoing projects, and the value of taking a walk.

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As told to Luke Thomas, 3049 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#), [Identity](#), [Production](#), [Failure](#).

My friend introduced me to your music when we were driving from New York City to New Orleans in 2015. I was blown away by the scope of the sound, which hit me as uncommonly vast. Can you tell me about selecting the elements of a song?

At around the time when you first heard me, I might've had some highfalutin' things to tell you. I've been doing this for so long, that it's become—for better, or worse—a very intuitive process. Certain groupings, or pairings of things, or certain textures in relation to others, I just find to be really satisfying.

And that's basically how it goes. Unless I'm doing something really, really specific, and thinking about maybe genre in a certain way—or thinking, "You know what: fretless bass," because I heard "Bright Size Life" that morning, and thought what would be an interesting texture is a little bit of Jaco Pastorius, or something like this.

There's moments where that mixing and matching, pulling from music-historical ideas—as a fan, and as somebody that actually has a deference to genre sometimes, in a positive way. I can think about picking things that way, because I have that fan in me that wants to express something kaleidoscopically through genre.

But more, and more I think I'm doing something intuitive. If you're doing some painting, you have a big white wall in front of you. "Well, what about this? And what about a couple of things here? Oh, no, that didn't really work." You just don't really know why.

What's your experience of artistic lineage? For example seeking out the writers who inspired the writers that you already love.

I'm an amateur musician. I'm a professional recordist. I remember sometime early on when I was really looking around, and saying, "Well, what are some of my contemporaries, or some of the people I respect, saying about these types of things?" I remember reading an interview with [Thurston Moore](#). He said, "I'm not a musician. I prefer not to be called that."

A musician is someone who—and this is me talking, not Thurston—if we were having a cocktail party, and there was a piano in the room, you'd say, "Oh, Dan, why don't you play us in Scott Joplin, or something?" I'd say, "Sure, no problem." I'd put my drink down, and we'd have a great time, and I'd play whatever. I could do that...if I was a musician, and I'm not. Nobody at a party wants to hear me sit down and start improvising, and doing some weird minimalist paradiddles that become some forlorn melody. In that sense, I'm just feeling my way through the instrument in an intuitive way—and an embarrassing way, frankly.

Much of what I do is as a person interested in ideas, interested in the technology of music, and interested in the possibility to express something without traditional means, which I don't have.

I was a bad piano student as a kid. My mom was a piano teacher. That can happen sometimes where you misbehave—you don't want to do it the right way, because it's too familiar. But at the same time, I was exposed to a lot of music tradition with everyone in my family playing on the upright piano. Reading music, playing some old Russian song. My dad would play old Russian songs, and things like that.

I am a person who really, really appreciates ideas around music and the story of music, but I don't consider myself to be necessarily part of a tradition, unless we're talking about maybe the tradition of computer music, and that's where I find myself—in that lineage, that story of 20th century modern electroacoustic music. That's the tradition I think I could be part of.

You said, you don't consider yourself a musician, you consider yourself a recordist. As a recordist, how do you approach the conception and release of EPs, versus LPs?

Oh, that's a good question. And I'll say, too, I wasn't trying to be cool. I do consider myself a composer, or something like that. There's a composition. It just doesn't follow a notated score. So composer is a good word for it. *Recordist* is a great word for it, I think.

EPs happen in two ways. One, you're asked very politely—maybe not asked, maybe it's a recommendation from a label, or from your management, "Do you have more material that we could continue to advertise your record with? *Maybe an EPs worth?*" The unsaid thing is, "It's not going well. We need more stuff." If you're a good dutiful musician, you then say, "Whatever you want, boss."

[laughs]

[Then there are the times] in the past where I had such an overabundance of material that it wasn't cynical. it was just purely like, "You know what? I do like this stuff, and I want it to be in the world." That happened around the album *Age Of* for me. There was a whole series of EPs [after *Age Of*]. A song like "Love In The Time Of Lexapro," on that EP, did much better in terms of streaming than anything on the record that came out prior. You never know in that sense. If you have an abundance of material, then maybe it's a good idea to put it out.

One thing I don't really love to do is generate new work that's not related to an album, just to keep stuff out there. Just to feed the machine. "Well, it's an EP, so it's a lesser work. Please don't take it too seriously," is the subtext.

So this is probably the point where I say, I think it's very likely that *Age Of* is the album I've listened to most in my life. Perhaps simply from my listens in 2018, it outstrips other things. I'm a huge fan of that album.

Yeah, the EPs were a natural extension of the LP, all pulled from the same sessions around the period of time. It feels really connected to the album. It wasn't simply a marketing exercise.

I'm interested to explore this idea of—and to not use the term cynically—but *packaging*. At what point did you give a project a name, and maybe even start to develop its visual look. When did you say, "and this EP will be called *Love In The Time Of Lexapro* and it will feature an image of Echo the Dolphin?"

[laughs] With this particular piece of music, the packaging was done by David Rudnick, and he's so good at what he does that I tend to not have to do much. With a person that really has a developed style, you just have normal conversations with them about the feeling tone of something, and then they just run with it. It's really best to not try to control these brilliant people. These are people that don't want to be controlled. That's why they're so good.

Can we dig a little bit more into overall ways of collaboration with artists who are the pros in another medium?

As hard as I've tried to be part of a band, I always end up wanting to retreat into my hobbit hole, and make things I want to make, and do things I want to do. But that doesn't mean that I don't yearn for this connection.

I think part of my growth was coming out of hiding, and finding ways to work with people collaboratively that honored my privacy, and discretions, artistically, but also nurtured the part of me that does want connection, because it's there and it would be odd to deny it.

Okay, well, maybe you're recording on your own, but maybe you'd like to think about involving people artistically. You don't paint, you're not doing graphic design. Okay, how can I make the album truly look like the way it feels? So now it's a serious collaboration, because you have a serious demand you're putting on an artist—to think deeply about this thing. Whatever it was in my life, I've always just wanted to take it pretty seriously. Real collaborations emerge because you're having real serious conversations about what things should be.

I often thought it was really interesting, and a little sad, that as a career artist gets older they lose the specificity of the artwork. They become more and more random, or ubiquitous. Their releases look random, and ubiquitous as they get older. No one's really steering the ship.

The look, say, of a record cover matches the fashion of the times more than what the artist has been doing.

Exactly. It's not individuating anymore. There's not a sense that the person making the music is also maybe having some interest in the other aspects of marketing the album. So far, I've cared a lot about those things, and collaborations emerge.

I remember playing a show in Iowa. I was the opening act for Philip Glass. He didn't really know much about me, but he felt maybe that it was his duty to give me a few words of advice—which is very kind, and sweet. I was the Puer, and he was a Senex at that moment, and we just accepted our roles happily.

Without really knowing that I had been doing those types of things that he suggested, he was like, "You've got to collaborate with everybody. You've got to collaborate with choreographers, and sculptors. You've got to mix it up, and you have to force yourself to do these things with..."

He was really, really intent on telling me to collaborate with all kinds of different artists, and "this is your path." This was as a reaction to my music—it was in between our sets. He'd heard the music, he didn't know who I was. He seemingly enjoyed it, and his big takeaway was: "You have* *to connect to other people."

So maybe he saw what I was doing as like a module that could be part of some bigger thing, and I don't think he's wrong. I think that's a part of me.

Maybe we can start to think about your collaborations with other musicians. When you start a project, do you have to call it ahead of time to say, "This is going to be largely solo, or this is going to be a collaboration?"

I don't like to open the door, typically, I'll be honest. So one thing is opening the door, then there's some excitement that's saying, "Yeah, come on in, let's talk about..." Then you get through the door, and...that initial impulse to meet an interesting person has to be met with a constructive conversation about what you're doing. If it's constructive, then I always say, "Well, let's experiment. Now is the time to experiment."

What experimenting means is simply that if it's a bad experiment, I will leave. I will not continue to do this. By communicating that, usually I find that everybody agrees. It's not just me, they concur.

So I try to establish a few basic ground rules. This ain't a sure thing until it is. When it is, we are no longer experimenting. We now have a great idea, some experiences together that back up the idea that feel like they can be developed, and a commitment to the idea. Then we can make some plan to refine the idea.

But I give myself these little exits, these little escape hatches, everywhere up until the completion of an

experimental phase. You're just spitballing, you're having fun, and trying things out. As long as everyone's on the same page, and nobody feels like they're wasting their time. It's like dating, or something. If everyone's communicating really well, and knows that this is some kind of fertile testing ground.

Recently, I had this impulse to make a bunch of loops for an artist that I know. Basically, unilaterally, without even having to say it, it was clear that nothing was interesting to her. Her silence was deafening.

So was that some weird waste of time? No. First of all, it was just my idea. It was an experiment. It didn't work for her. Nobody's feelings are hurt. And now, guess what? I have this weird pile of loops that I know, somehow, will get utilized in some other way. Whether I start taking them apart, or they might go to someone else...maybe in five years something occurs to me. But I've made it, and I'm happy that it's there. I have folders like that. It's just, let's see what happens. Some songs never get finished. Some songs take two hours. I don't put any big value judgment on, "Oh, it just comes out of you. And when it's good, it's effortless."

I don't think so. I don't think it was effortless to construct Taj Mahal or something. I don't think that was effortless. Some projects have that quality to them. They're complex, or they're mysterious, until the point is revealed, or sometimes they never come together, and all of it is worth archiving, and keeping yourself open. Keep trying to make new stuff, even if old stuff is piling up.

How do you keep your archive of work useful to you over time?

I have a system where usually I'm looking at a date range, because basically the most useful top-down taxonomy thing is time. I just look at a year, and I just know, or a season, and I know. It's usually quarterly like that. There's a seasonal thing. So Spring 2021, there were certain ideas I was playing with. If they're good enough, they leave Spring 2021, and they go to a folder where there's an active project, like Project X, Y, Z, and it's no longer in time.

I think it's really important to not title things too vaguely. You'll thank yourself later. For that first layer, it's helpful for it to be [organized by] time. If they're just demos—which is really what we're talking about is an archive of demos and unfinished work, then it's organized by time. Then, within that, name your demos, and individuate them somehow. Don't just call them the date they were made, give them some feeling, tone to the name.

That makes a ton of sense. As we're getting into practical advice like how to label things, what are some non-creative practices in your life that are vital to your practice as an artist?

The biggest one in my life has been walking. People talk about "the talking cure," therapeutically, but I think that walking cure is where I'm at.

Something happens to your body. First of all, you're in a rhythmic situation that's liminal, and I'm talking about walking without...you're not walking to the grocery store, you're not going to get something done, you're not getting your steps in because you want to live for 300 years. You're just walking. And if you just walk, then you are out of control a little bit, because you're just walking. The further out you walk, you enter a meditative state, and you get a lot of thinking done. And after a while you're tired of thinking, and you're just really embodied. You're really in your body. Good things happen when I walk, especially for long distances of time. I have a 40-minute loop where I live that's nice, but I wish it was a tiny bit longer.

You, and Immanuel Kant. I think he would take literally the same walk, the same time, every day.

Yeah, I love it. Wherever you are, walk. When I was living in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, I was very happy to walk pretty much all the way to South Williamsburg, and back. Maybe I would take myself out to lunch, maybe I would just walk, often with headphones. It's not important to somehow be disconnected from whatever. I'm very happy to listen for a while, then stop, listen to demos, listen to a book, other records. It just gives you an hour where you can just actually say, "You know what?" There's really no point except attentiveness in motion.

Do you ever, now, or did you in the past ever find yourself skipping the walk? Finding yourself unable to fit this important thing into your day?

Yeah, depression. Deep, dark depression. [laughs] I know there's something wrong if I'm not putting on my Mephistos, and hitting the street. Maybe just by virtue of just being busy, but it's not a good excuse. If you're busy, you'll take a walk.

But yeah, moodiness, melancholia—that's when the walks cease. Which is too bad. That's exactly what you should be doing to get yourself out of it. It's really good medicine, it's excellent.

Daniel Lopatin Recommends:

My Effin Life by Geddy Lee: I am a longtime fan of Rush but knew very little about Geddy and his background, which resonated with me deeply. He describes the Holocaust through his mother's eyes, his musical awakening in early adolescence, and many other things that I was very heartened by.

Pol Taburet: Pol is an artist from France I'm really enjoying at the moment. He employs both deeply intimate and impersonal archetypes in his paintings that generate feelings in me that are hard to pin down.

Night Flight: The Night Flight app is fun to put on in the studio and have on in the background on mute — lots of oddities from counter cultures' past. I especially like the old band docs.

Seoul: I just returned from a set of shows in Asia and I will say that hanging out in Seoul was a revelation. The warmth and energy of its people was a beautiful thing to experience, it's popping off artistically there and the futuristic mood of the city puts you in a trance.

Walking / No Devices: I enjoy taking a walk device-free a lot lately. It felt slightly awkward initially but pretty soon you remember what it was like before we had pocket computers and it's a good feeling. Being bored isn't boring.

Name

Daniel Lopatin

Vocation

musician, composer, and producer

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