On keeping your work personal

Musician Daniela Andrade discusses YouTube fame, understanding her own sense of integrity, and putting down her phone when she's in a creative mode.

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As told to Mary Retta, 2566 words.

Tags: Music, Family, Beginnings, Process, Inspiration, Time management, Focus, Success.

How did you get started as a musician?

I grew up in a family of singers. My dad has a really beautiful voice, and my siblings as well. We grew up harmonizing with each other at home. I sang for the first time in front of an audience when I was six years old, and that was a church audience for Christmas. I learned in that moment that performing was something that confronted me with a lot of feelings. I think I had a mini-meltdown; my mom had to walk me through that day. I discovered that I really liked the writing process of music when I was 12 years old and I learned my first three guitar chords. I wrote my first song and I was like, whoah, what is this feeling?

Do you remember what your first song was that you wrote?

Oh my god, yes. It was called “Lullaby.” And I had written it, if I recall correctly, because my sister had already had her first child. I had written it for him to go to sleep. I still have tender memories of that song.

What would you say your general songwriting process is? Do you feel like the same sorts of things typically inspire you, or is it more based on fleeting feelings?

Now that I’ve done two EPs, I’m in my more matured songwriting era, and I feel like each one has taught me something different that informed this album a little differently.

Melodies didn’t come first with this album. It was words. I would do this process of word collecting, where if a word really stuck out from a conversation—either with a friend or something I’d overhear on the sidewalk—I’d slip it into my Notes app, and just put it as a title and leave it empty, and then I’d save it. And whenever I’d be in the studio searching for words, a melody I’d make in the studio would somehow attach itself to a word that I had in my Notes app. So words would come first, then melody would be the string that tied them. And the writing process was facilitated really nicely by that, actually. It’s something that I think I would like to continue practicing.

When you write a song, is it usually a multi-draft process?

There’s a few songs on this record that came pouring out. It was like they were ready to come out as soon as I saw the word and I found that melody in the chord structure. It was one session, maybe one hour. I know for “Oda,” which is the title track, it was actually a 20-minute process where it was just coming out really quickly.

It was crazy. Actually, it feels surreal. It feels like you’re pulling a string from the sky, and it just keeps giving and giving. And you’re like, wait, what? And then some of them were pieces. I’d have the first verse and I’d have a part of the chorus, but then I’d have to come back and rework and rework. It was a bit of both.

I love your music videos. I think the first music video I remember watching of yours was for your song "Tamale," and I still think about it. How involved are you in the creative direction of those? How do you see visual arts and music coming together in terms of your storytelling?

Really quickly after finishing a song I'm always like, "I have a video idea and it's going to be so sick if we have a budget to do this." I'm always image sourcing. I really like collecting images, and just organizing them into different folders on my computer, and then making mood boards of a season.

For "Tamale" specifically, obviously the context of that song, there were so many memories of my sisters and I helping my mom make tamales over the years, which was so integral to that record. I wanted to put it in a video somehow. Thankfully, every single director I've worked with has been really nice and collaborative, and taught me so much throughout the process—but I really love to be hands-on on the concept. And I love being in the editing room, because I do think that a video comes to life quite a bit in the editing room. It's such an important piece for me.

You first started gaining a following as a musician by doing YouTube covers. What was that experience like for you? Were you hoping to become a professional musician at the time?

I think within the context of what YouTube was at that time, which was so different, I really didn't expect anything out of it. I just did it for fun. I really felt like I was a massive procrastinator with school. And this was the perfect excuse: just uploading videos that I would send to my friends. Quite literally, I started it by sending the YouTube link to my friends. And I was like, "Look, I just learned this new finger picking pattern." And they'd be like, "Cool." I used to treat YouTube as this forum space, too, like what Reddit sort of is. I'd reply to every single comment and DM. It was a way to build community.

When things took a turn, it was very surprising for me. I was at a crux in my life where I had just applied to university for creative writing, because I thought I was going to go into English literature. I thought to myself that it was an opportunity I couldn't really pass up. Things were moving along for me, and music was manifesting as this path, but I didn't know if it was going to work out or not. So I gave myself a time limit. I was 18 at the time. And I was like, "If by 22 I don't really know where this is going, then maybe I'll go back to school." But things just kept rolling after that, and I've just kept following it.

Something that I've heard from artists is there's a pressure now to use social media as a marketing tool. Your story of practicing finger-picking patterns on YouTube is so pure, but now I imagine it's so much more difficult for an artist to do that. It feels more like it's connected to their livelihood and there's a lot more at stake.

I definitely feel like, amongst my artist friends and within myself, there's a pressure now. It's different from how I was doing it back in the day. Now it's almost like an expectation to be extremely online as an artist. It's not just about creating the body of work and releasing it. It's also about a presence around it. I mean, I think it is talked about a lot, but I guess when I speak to my musician friends in private, the pressure feels really crippling for a lot of us, because we just want to be creating, at this point. But it's also a part of the deal now, it seems. I don't know. It's an open-ended question for me, because I do wonder where all of this is going, and how it's affecting artists and the work that we make.

What's your relationship to social media now, as a person and as an artist?

As a person, I honestly struggle with it. I'm highly addicted. It's designed to be addictive, and I'm hooked. I try to manage staying off of it by not checking it first thing in the morning. But during release cycles like this, I can't help it. I really do care how things are going and want to be active. When I'm in creative mode, like when I was making this album, I was so avid about not being on my phone. And there was two years where I just wasn't on anything. And it was really, really mentally refreshing and so needed. It was a nice silence that just fell upon me.

Where would you say you pull inspiration from? I'm wondering if you listen to a lot of albums or if you're looking at other mediums of art as well.

I'm not listening to a lot of music when I'm creating. I'm mostly taking in books, films, or other forms like the fine arts, I guess. Paintings and illustrations, those really inspire me as well. Reading about other people's process as well is so relieving.

What have you read recently?

I read Jack Whitten's *Notes from the Woodshed*, which is just all of his note-taking during his process of creating work. He was a really important abstract painter, but he was trying to inject a lot of soul in his abstract painting, and created new techniques that were never seen before. He would dry these really thick sheets of paint, and then cut them up into little cubes, and create these mosaics. Really impactful process… I just love that he invented something totally new out of really basic materials.

Could you talk a little bit about what an average day or week looks like for you?

I am a very routine-driven person, almost to my own detriment. But I love calendaring things and preparing my day prior. The night before, I make a to-do list of the next day. And I actually created this system for myself where I can't have more than three big creative tasks in a day. Because I would sometimes put pressure on myself to do six things, especially near the end of the process, where it's like, I need to do all these vocal comping, or vocal takes, or need to decide one big section of a song. But what can I handle in a day realistically? I sorted it out so that if I could give four solid hours in my booth, I would feel accomplished and like I showed up to work that day. And my morning routine always involves some kind of movement.

What kind of movement?

I like to do yoga, or running, or rock climbing.

Do you feel like your relationship to your own creativity has shifted since entering a bigger spotlight?

That's a good question. I definitely feel, in a practical sense, like it's changed because it's my livelihood. Sometimes it really does feel like hard work to show up and do my best. And sometimes I just really emotionally don't want to. There's days where I've pushed myself. I've tried to learn that balance of [accepting] it's okay to not have a productive day and to just sit with feelings, and process them.

But as far as where the music comes from, I'm very adamant about writing all of my lyrics and having them feel honest to me. I feel like my body can't lie. If I'm not doing it for the intentions that feel right to me, that connect to my core values, it doesn't feel good. So, in that sense, I feel so tied to the version of me that was 12 and started to upload videos on YouTube, because I did it out of a place of having a lot of fun, but also finding community, finding connection within myself. And to me, there's a really big healing aspect to music and what it does for me, because I feel like all these little fragments of my life, that I'm either not quite processing yet or in the process of understanding, tie together through my music.

Sometimes I'll listen to a song that I wrote two years before and I'll finally understand, oh, that's what I was saying, or that's what I was going through. So it has this magical effect on my personal life. I hope to never lose that because I know there's a system within this music industry. And I've tried my best to keep things as personal as possible through creating my label with my manager and releasing things independently, having a lot of creative control and freedom and really choosing what I say yes to.

Can you talk about what kind of steps you've taken to preserve your personal or creative integrity?

When things were starting to take off on YouTube, I did get offers from labels. I had meetings with these people and they were lovely. And they were offering really nice, amazing things, but for some reason it didn't feel

aligned. I felt like I needed to grow in my production, because I always knew I wanted to produce and compose myself—as a songwriter, and as a person. It just didn't feel like my timing. Luckily, I had met my friend and manager, Jeff. And he decided to go in with me on creating a record label.

It's been a really organic learning process between the two of us of how to do this, how to release things, just through observation of the landscape of music, which constantly keeps changing. But I'm so grateful. I have to say that being a Canadian artist is quite unique, in the sense that we have public funding here. I've tapped into the grant system here, which makes a lot of what I do possible, as well as obviously support from listeners. But that really changed the game, because when I was reading certain contracts that labels were offering and I was doing the math with what I could get with the grant system here, at least to make my life sustainable, to create a body of work, I was like, I could do this, take a chance on myself, and still keep all of my masters and my creative freedom. I'd rather go with that.

What does success as an artist look like to you?

I had this amazing deep dive with the word integrity last year. Just looking up the etymology of it and trying to find an understanding of it in my own life. I feel like there's something about the mid-20s to early 30s that was quite existential for me—not just on a personal level, but also in my work. I was really trying to define my value systems and where I sat with a lot of big things in my life. Personally and professionally, I always feel my best when integrity is present and when my core values feel in alignment. There's a sense of fulfillment in that, that nobody can take away from you. And to me, that is very, very successful. Now, there's a whole other lens of how it's perceived, how many people take it in, however you want to measure the metrics of that. But for me, it's not relevant. That's not the most important part.

Daniela Andrade recommends:

Starting your day with a physical book—10 minutes of reading or even just a couple of pages.

At the beginning of the month, write a handwritten letter addressed to yourself, something you think you'll need to remember four weeks from now. Fold, tuck, and seal in an envelope, set aside some time and open at the end of the month.

Lamy Studio fountain pens

Paper shop in my city, Montreal, called Au Papier Japonais

Ryuichi Sakamoto: Coda (2017) directed by Stephen Nomura

Name
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Vocation
musician