

On growing and finding your artistic community



Musician S. Holden Jaffe (Del Water Gap) discusses how place helps shape community and being embarrassed of ambitious creativity

December 13, 2023 -

As told to Jess Focht, 2825 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Success](#), [Focus](#), [Promotion](#), [Beginnings](#).

How'd you get your start, and did you always want to be a working and touring musician?

I started out when I was a little boy. I was really shy and pretty bad at sports, so I listened to a lot of music, and I would journal a lot and carry around a notebook and write stories in it. I really wanted to write books when I was a kid. An early teacher of mine in elementary school told me that I needed to get a publisher before I could put out a book. So I changed my mind and decided that I wanted to write songs.

My neighbor gave me a guitar, and I started writing some songs. When I was finishing high school, I taught myself to record, then turned a storage locker in my high school into a little recording studio. I made the first Del Water Gap EP that way.

I didn't always want to be a musician, but I always wanted to be a writer. And I still identify as a writer who does music. I think music is a great bite-sized medium for delivering literature to people's ears. I love listening to lyrics. I love reading lyrics. I know not everyone loves lyrics, but I do.

Yeah, I think your songwriting is a big reason why I love your music.

Thank you. That was always the thing I knew I had. Before I could sing, before I could play an instrument, I always knew I could write. I always figured if that I was able to do this thing my whole life, it would be because of my writing. And my whole life is not over yet, but I'm part of the way through. And so far the writing seems to be the thing that keeps me inspired.

Speaking of that, at your show last week at the Flower Shop, you talked about how New York is such a big part of your songwriting, and I feel like anyone who listens to your music can pick up on that. You have a strong sense of place in your lyrics. How does the city inspire your work?

I built my identity as an adult and as an artist in New York City. I moved to New York City for college when I was 18. I moved from a really small town. I grew up between two dairy farms on either side in the woods, and didn't have neighbors to speak to or any sort of artistic community. I moved to New York and all of a sudden there were all of these interesting, young, excited, eccentric, well-dressed people that were as excited to create and consume as I was, and as excited to have these very highbrow conversations about indie music as I was. About two weeks into my time in New York City, I bought a leather jacket, an electric guitar, and my first pair of boots.

That'll do it. You're set. [laughs]

As one does. Then I started walking around New York City feeling very different. That feeling of New York—the feeling of being an artist in New York—very much molded my creative child, the one that lives in me and makes these songs with me.

I think that's something inherent to New York City and inherent to my experience having come into adulthood there. I had my first relationships in New York, and I made a lot of my best friends in New York. I learned how to use my downtime in New York City.

What do you do when you're 19 and you have two hours? That's a really terrifying feeling. So learning that you can just wander, you can sit on a bench, you can go to a museum, you can go to a movie. It's all in New York. You have a lot of access to that stuff in a way that you don't in other places. You can just sort of wander into an event and wander into a friendship.

Yeah, exactly. New York is so present in your work and has clearly helped shape you as an artist. Those early days you're talking about when you were just starting out helped shape you as an artist, too.

Speaking to creativity and your songwriting process, how has that evolved since that early phase of your life? And how has it evolved with that growth, especially now you're a touring musician and it's your full-time job?

People always say you have your whole life to make your first album. And I didn't make an album until long into my career, but I think that anecdote is true in the sense that the first songs that I wrote came very easily. There's nothing to really compare your work to. You're in such a discovery mode. So a lot of my early writing was very uninhibited and very courageous and very honest, and some things worked and some things didn't. As I wrote more, learned about writing, and met other writers, I became a better writer, but it became much harder to access that channel.

Was it hard not to compare yourself to people when you were just starting out in indie rock? Because I think your sound is still really specific. I've always thought it was. Like your song "Chastain." That's been my one of my favorite songs forever.

Thank you. It's my favorite of mine. Glad that you mentioned that song. That album [*Don't Get Dark*] was released right when I feel like I started coming into myself as a writer. And it was also right when I was starting to decide to leave music because I wasn't feeling like the life that my music career at that time was affording me was a healthy or successful or good one. So I think about that era, creatively and practically, with a lot of very strong nostalgia and melancholy and sadness. And also the gratitude that I got through that phase, and gratitude for people like you that were actually listening and aware of my music at that point. Because at the time, I really felt like I was a little bit too in my own shit to realize that there was anyone who was actually listening to my music or following me.

So you were going to quit music?

Yeah. I had made that record, and during that time I had an unfortunate series of professional relationships.

It was a moment to really pop up my head and look around. I came to this point where I was like, man, this doesn't make me happy anymore. I'm stressed all the time. And I love making music, but I don't love struggling all the time. I was still working a lot of jobs and doing music, but not in the way that I wanted to be doing music. And then of course, the week I started calling friends and telling them I was quitting music, everything changed, that's just the way life goes.

But once again, just to bring back my first EP that you mentioned, I have a really special place in my heart for that moment creatively, because I was hurting as a person and to think some good art could have come out of all that hurt makes me feel it was worth something.

It's one of those things you look back on and it makes sense, but while it's happening it sucks.

Yeah, totally.

Do you feel like the community around you really helped you evolve to the next step of your creative process? Maybe even in terms of just encouragement and seeing parts of you that you weren't seeing in yourself?

Actually, I think the contrary happened. I think that being in New York and being in the scene there taught me how to write and taught me who I was. But I think that being in New York towards the beginning of COVID actually caused me to just put a little bit of a ceiling on what I was capable of. And I think that was my own doing. I think it took me leaving New York to feel like I could try in a different way. I think I was always really embarrassed to try too hard. And I think I was really embarrassed to try to be ambitious creatively.

And to be ambitious professionally.

You know, I had never posed for a photo until 2020 or 2021. Which is okay, but I think that's representative of the shift that happened for me when I left New York. Where I was like, it's okay if not everything is completely off the cuff and casual. It's okay to say "I'm great" and "Look at me." In a sense I think it can make people actually enjoy your music more.

I don't know if it's just an indie-specific thing, but I do feel like sometimes being "undiscovered" is part of that genre. So it's like you don't want to seem like you know you're talented, because the whole gist is being under the radar.

Totally. That's what it is, needing to keep your confidence a secret. I think it's okay to be confident, and I think it's actually really becoming to be confident. To say, you know, I'm good. Because the act of putting out records demands attention regardless. If you're going to be someone that is putting out your work into the world, you're demanding some level of attention. And I don't think that that has to signify narcissism.

Right, exactly. Yeah. I think it's confusing for people maybe our age who are dealing with the lack of nuance when it comes to the difference between narcissism and self-confidence. You know?

Well, and I think because also the entertainment industry does attract a lot of narcissists. But it doesn't mean that you're a narcissist by nature of being in the entertainment industry.

Right.

And a lot of narcissists do really well. There's this other part of it, which is the aspect of being a musical artist can feel like public service, bringing people together. Especially in the wake of the COVID lockdowns, there were these moments where I'd be in Carrboro playing a show to 300 people, and they'd come up to me after and say this is their first time in a room full of people since the beginning of the pandemic. There's this aspect of being a touring musician that I think is really community-forward. It has less to do with getting attention and more to do with serving a group of people who want to be together and sharing an experience.

Do you have any other hobbies that help you stay in touch with your creative self?

I actually sew a lot when I'm home. I have a sewing machine. I love doing embroidery. I've very poorly hemmed some clothing and repaired some things, but I'm learning. I love taking photos, which is great on tour. And I love shooting a roll over the course of a few months of travel and then forgetting what I've shot and then seeing it come back. It's a beautiful time capsule of travel.

I love reading, I love going on walks. I'm really close with my grandma. So we talk a lot, and we actually started a film club together during the pandemic, so we watch a movie every week and we talk about it on Zoom with five of her friends and five of my friends.

Oh my god, I love that.

That's a big part of my creative input. My time off is watching movies and thinking about them and talking about them. She's 98 and she gives a 45-minute lecture every week on whatever movie we've watched.

Do you have any favorite movies that inspire you?

Yeah, film was a big part of the inspiration for the visual world of my album—the music videos and the photography. The photography was very David Lynch-inspired. I learned about him in the last couple of years, and I got into transcendental meditation. So there's a lot of David Lynch and transcendental meditation overlap. I had this sort of explosion of euphoria around learning to meditate and learning about his films.

I love French New Wave. My favorite film right now is a film called Tampopo, which is a Japanese western. It's really interesting. It's about food and sensuality. You should watch it. It's really beautiful, and funny and sort of erotic and off-putting. I watched Psycho recently. It's not what you think it is. We all know the tropes of Hitchcock, and we've all seen that shot of the scream in the shower, but it's such a visually stunning movie.

It makes sense that you're so into movies and they influence your creative world in the way they do. The visuals of your albums and music videos clearly represents that.

Have you seen that terrible AMC Loew's intro? [laughs]

Oh yeah, with Nicole Kidman?

Yeah, and she says "tears feel good in here" or whatever. Because it's kind of true. It's kind of beautiful to slip into a movie for a little bit, and it gives you a little bit of a lens, I think, which is why I love watching cinema when I'm writing.

As far as your creative work is concerned, how do you define success? Do you feel successful?

I think that it is a line that is constantly shifting. What I'm trying to practice is thinking about success as creative survival. So just building a life and a career that allows me to continue to make art and have it feel good and productive, and to not need to create from a place of scarcity or a place of desperation.

I have a particularly good relationship with my label, but signing a record deal was the first time that I felt the pressure of deadline and commerciality. And I think that those pressures were probably more imposed by me on myself than anyone else. But I think as more people have become involved in my career, I think I slowly felt myself drifting from that notion of creative survival being the goal.

So something that I'm very much working on returning to examining is: what does it mean to live a beautiful life? What does it mean to live an artistic life? And view the world through a creative-inspired lens? What do I need to happen in my life and my career for that to be possible?

And beyond that, I have some really lovely friends who have pushed me to have really concrete goals and write them down and try to do some manifestations. Some, I do not chase, I attract. So I would love to sell out Radio City. That's a big one for me. Radio City Music Hall. Saw Cirque du Soleil there, saw the Rockettes there as a kid. Graduated from college there. Yeah, that's pretty much it. I want to keep creating and I want to play Radio City.

Del Water Gap Recommends:

High and Low (1963) directed by Akira Kurosawa. One of my favorite films from one of the greatest film directors of all time. Pure drama. Beautifully shot. Police procedural meets social commentary.

Pinhais Spiced Sardines in Olive Oil. If you know me, you know I loved tinned fish, and the best tinned fish in the world comes from Portugal. Tinned sardines are unequivocally the best snack, as healthy as they are tasty.

Protein rich brain food. Lots of omega-3s. And they essentially keep forever. My grandma's best friend has a tin of sardines in her pantry she bought in 1996.

Conservas Pinhais is based in Mathshinos and produces some wonderful stuff. It's a bit hard to find in the United States but tinned fish is easy to sneak past even the sharpest agricultural dog if you're on your way back from the Mediterranean. The Pinhais label, as with many tinned fish labels, is iconically beautiful, showing a somber looking fisherman with a beard and bare feet repairing his net. Lovely.

Chillbies shoes. The ultimate slip on. Rain boot meets clog. They're robust and elegant and have this soft gel insole. My favorite tour footwear.

The Sacrificial Code by Kali Malone. I listen to this record more or less every week. Hearing it feels like praying.

Sunny & Annie's Deli on Avenue B. New York's finest sandwich. Bodega of dreams. All of the phở sandwiches are fire but the Obama is great as well. Its next to Tompkins Square so you can take your sandwich and sit in the park.

Name

S. Holden Jaffe

Vocation

musician (Del Water Gap)

□

James T. Bee