On being honest in your life and work

Musician Ela Minus on trusting your instincts, the energy of working alone, being intentional, why deadlines matter, and the revolution of the everyday.

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3853 words.

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You started out in a hardcore band when you were a teenager; now you make solo electronic music. Is it hard sticking to a schedule with nobody else involved? How do you keep showing up?

It's easier for me. Not the showing up part, because I've never had trouble with the showing up part, but the inspiration part is so much easier. When you're in a band, it's like, "Okay, we're rehearsing at 10 am every single day." Sometimes you can be there and you don't get inspired, and everyone has to leave by noon. You have an idea at 11:50 and everyone is like, "Oh, we have to go have lunch," and it's lost. But when I'm by myself, I still show up at 10 and sometimes nothing will happen, but I don't have a limit. So I've found it way more productive.

This is the first record I've made on my own, but it's been faster than anything I've done in a group setting. The thing that has taken the longest is when I've brought in other people. Like, with the label and stuff, it's like, "Oh, naturally it takes longer."

When we were walking over here, you were saying that you've been waking up earlier, and that you discovered you write darker material in the mornings—so you do email first. On a practical level, do you find getting up earlier and getting the business stuff out of the way allows you to focus on the actual creative work the rest of the day?

I think so. Disconnecting to get the musical work done is important for me. But also, I tend to go too crazy with my work. I'm trying to be more balanced, hence waking up earlier and doing email in the morning. When I'm writing, I won't talk to anyone, I won't go out. I think and work for the record. This time I found it interesting to experiment with myself: like, *How would I write if I fast for 24 hours? What's the music like after that?*

At first, I wrote for a week in the morning, and I was like, "Oh, this is way darker than when I write at night." I realized I don't have that much trouble waking up early if I go to bed early. But I can't make anything creatively. I'll be fine editing or mixing or doing things that don't require composing, the part of playing that's not writing or improvising. Answering emails is kind of like editing, so I focus on that. I can get it out of the way and then work on the actual music.

Why do you think the morning inspires dark material? Why did you decide not to keep pushing in that direction?

I'm naturally a night owl; night is when I feel more "myself." So the "darkness" that comes out in the morning might be because I'm not in my element, and so I overthink it? The ego speaks louder because I'm more self aware

out of feeling uncomfortable? I'm just speculating… [*laughs*]

So much of life and thriving in it is about knowing yourself and what works best for you. I can sit down and get it done in the morning if i need to, but what for? What's the point of pushing myself in an unnatural way if i have no real need to? I'm trying to make music with as much heart and soul in it, not just for the sake of it, or to be productive or get the quota of "musical work for the day." I want to make it mindfully and lovingly and have fun while I'm doing it. That's why I never push it.

Putting thought into the mindset is as important as the actual writing. It's all connected, which is why I also think about what I ate for the past 24 hours, what book I'm reading at the moment, whom I've seen lately, etc. It absolutely all comes out in the music.

But also, it's important to be flexible and keep connected to yourself and open to change. To be aware of your changing self. I often think about the things we keep telling ourselves we are, and how those sometimes become prisons. Like, I want to be careful to not keep telling myself "I'm a night owl" because I may not always be. Maybe one day I'll change and only write in the mornings. Maybe when I'm older it will be completely opposite. We can have another chat then and see how these things change with time… [*laughs*] The important thing is I always want to be present and listen to myself.

You were just saying fasted for 24 hours, at one point, to see what happened with your creative mindset. Did you have an overall concept for the record? Or did it just depend on the day?

It depended on the day. This album, compared to the EPs that came before, was the first time I had a clear concept. With the EPs, I chose the titles before I started writing. I used a word or something to guide me, something where I'm like, "Okay. This is going to be the essence of this music." The word "luminous" for example. Then, every time I was at a crossroad during the process, I would go back to that original idea—or title—for clarity. Even for silly things: If I was making a kick drum sound and the word was "luminous" i would think, "Which kick sound feels the most luminous"? Things like that.

But with this record, I wanted to make a full length and I needed to do as much as I could with it. I needed to make as much material as I could—just puke it out. I did put myself on a time limit. I was like, "I'm going to write for three months. Just puke, puke, puke, and then I'm done." Every 10 days, I would go back and listen to everything, and choose the best parts. And eventually, it took shape.

The experiments I put on myself were because it's such a new thing, to make a full length. I've studied playing drums all my life, and I had experience making records as a drummer, as part of a band. I knew what to do when I was in a recording studio or in rehearsal space. This time, completely by myself and at home, I was trying to figure out what was working and what wasn't.

How did you make the shift from drumming to making electronic music?

Half of it was I was bored by only playing drums. It got to a point where I was so comfortable with it, it was like walking. I still love it, but it wasn't challenging enough. Not to say I'm some master of drums, but it wasn't challenging anymore.

And I was hearing this music I'm making now in my head. A lot of ideas that I tried to share with my bands, and it wasn't being heard. They were like, "Just play drums. No. Just keep playing drums. It's fine." I wanted to get that music in my head out, so I did it on my own.

I already had so much knowledge of things and I had a small set-up because I had been working on synths and studying synths for so long. I would buy old machines to practice soldering. I had already taken an MPC and broke it apart to understand how it worked. I already had these instruments at home, so I thought, why don't I just try it?

As far as the live show, did it take time getting used to being a solo artist versus a drummer?

Absolutely. Also, because I didn't plan on pursuing it. What has made this project so special is precisely that I never had, still don't have, any expectations or even plans for it. Once you've done something for a decent amount of years, like I did playing drums, you have all of these extra expectations attached to it, it's too much pressure, just because it's what you've done all of your life. It's what your friends see you as. It's such a big part of your identity. I desperately needed to break loose, I think… looking back. [*laughs*] I wasn't conscious of it when it happened.

I was annoyed by a lot of music out in the world and how overly produced it was, and I was getting so frustrated as an audience member. I'd go see my favorite bands and say, "This sounds like shit" because they overdub everything and then they're not playing anything. When I made the first EP, I wasn't thinking of playing live, but I still wanted the recording to be great. Basically, I didn't know how any other way, so I approached it like a band. I got one synth that was the bass synth: the bass player. And I didn't overdub anything. I recorded three songs like that, put one on YouTube, and soon after someone asked me to go to Colombia to play a festival, I was like, "Ah, I have no idea how to play this live." But then I was like, "Well, I guess I recorded everything live with these three synths, so if I just take them there and do it live, it should be and sound exactly the same."

I took a chance and did it. I remember that first time perfectly, when I was up front with nothing in between me and the audience. For some reason, I placed all the synths to my side, instead of in front. I did that intuitively for that first show. For the first time, I felt like I was connecting with people. When I play drums, I go inside. I usually have my eyes closed. But with this electronic music, I had my eyes open and I was looking at the audience.

Do you think part of your success has been that you're coming at your music from a punk rock approach, like, "I'm doing the thing I like to do, and people can pay attention to that if they want"?

Absolutely. I owe everything that's happened success-wise to 50 percent attitude and 50 percent just being nice—and I don't think these are separate. I wasn't pushing for any of it. It's like love. You know how people say when you're looking for the love of your life, whenever you stop looking, it's going to come? I'm very grateful for many things in my life, but probably the one, professionally, I'm the most grateful for is having grown up in a punk rock scene.

People can listen to music without absorbing the politics. How important are the politics to your record? It seems integral, to the record and to you.

It's empowering to have a career, and simply a life, where you're true to yourself. There's no compromise. When you're not expecting to get anything back, you're just creating out of the need to create. You're saying the things you need to say. I think If you're a good person, living in the world right now, naturally you would want to rebel against the power structures.

Politics are not disconnected from our everyday lives. They affect everything. Politics are killing Black people, immigrants, indigenous people, and our planet, just off the top of my head… [*laughs*] I can keep going.

It wasn't my intention to make a "political" record at all. I think I'm simply paying attention to what's happening around me and that comes out in the music. And now that it's done, and I hear what I made, I do hope this album serves as an invitation to act, to question your everyday actions and make decisions based on not only what is good for you but what is good for the people around you, even for those you don't know, and for the planet. It's an invitation to be present and pay attention, and I think that will inevitably lead to acting towards change.

Speaking of which, the lyrics are almost like slogans, or parts of a manifesto. How do you go about composing them?

I’m always improvising, with both the music and the lyrics. Usually with the lyrics, I’ll get maybe one or two sentences, sometimes less, sometimes an entire song. Because I’m recording while I’m improvising, I’ll just scribble them down when I listen back. Sometimes, of course, I’ll be like, “This doesn’t make any sense.” So I go back and fix those. But usually they come out together, the music and the words.

I usually don’t refine. I usually simply add or remove. Sometimes I just get one phrase. But usually, I get maybe the chorus, or whatever. I tend to be repeating one sentence. Usually I’ll hear the song once, and I’m like, “Yeah, I like this, but I want this to last longer or I want this to last less.” So I start playing them again, and once I start playing them again, I decide if I need more lyrics or not. I tend to add more to develop the feeling or the idea that I hear, but I don’t really edit that much.

Has this album shifted the pace of how you normally work? I know putting out a full length with a bigger label can mean making less music and focusing more on promoting the record.

Yeah. I’m starting again now. I finished the record almost a year ago, which is crazy. I guess this is the longest I’ve spent without focusing on writing. I tend to feel I’m too… I don’t know if weak is the word. But maybe I don’t have as much strength as other people that are able to go out and talk about themselves and talk about their music and then go home and forget about that and write new music without all the conversations of the day making their way to the music. I just can’t do that. I could, but again, what for? I don’t want to make a record about promoting another record. [*laughs*]

So much of this year was me talking about this album because I was showing it to people, making decisions, working on the other aspects of it. I wanted to release it as soon as I finished it. It took a lot for me to slow down and be like, “Okay. I’ll be patient.” But I’m really glad I did. I finally experienced the value of doing things with time and ease and finding the right people to surround yourself with… all these things take time.

You’re talking about the immediacy of improvising, and releasing something takes so long. Having the support and structure of a label is great, but it’s more cooks, and so it can also be frustrating.

Right. Over the past four years I was only doing EPs because I knew that I wanted them to be released really fast. So I was like, “I’m not going to make a record. I’m going to make three songs. Four songs. And that’s it. Then, instead of waiting a year, I can do this every four months.” I did that and it worked, and I think it was really important for my process to get to know myself, and what i wanted to do and to have been able to do that in “public.”

But I also think I would have gotten tired and bored if I kept doing everything like that. Change will keep you alive. I always remember what my grandfather used to say. He was like, “Never forget that the brain is also a muscle.” He was like, “You go to the gym to stay strong and healthy. You have to do the same for your brain. Keep it moving, keep challenging it, make it healthier and stronger with ‘exercises.’”

Creatively, are you a person who expects to get a certain amount done every day? Do you set a daily goal, or is it more like an overall goal?

An overall goal. When I’m in it it never feels like I’m doing enough, but I trust the process, and like I was saying before, I’ve learned that I am the work—everything I do, read, eat, think, feel, is part of the music, so taking care of myself is taking care of the music. Working on myself is working on the music, so in a way I’m always “working.”

I do get stressed with deadlines, even when they’re self-imposed, but I’ve learned they’re good for me. They help get things done. Of course, it has its ups and downs. Sometimes it sucks and you get stressed and frustrated and sad and lonely, but then I hear what I made and it feels like it was all worth it. Sometimes, even if you try, you don’t get anything done for weeks, and you start getting extremely anxious, and you’re like, “Fuck. I haven’t done anything. It’s been weeks.” But then something happens and you get inspired and make magic in a single hour. And all those weeks seem worth it. I’ve learned to trust myself.

It’s definitely useful having self-imposed deadlines. It can also be helpful knowing someone—an editor, a label, a bandmate—is waiting to see what you’ve created. I’ve found, for me, it helps with the focus, and I don’t find it stressful.

True. I guess even before the team I have now, I was doing that to myself. It creates so much more anxiety if you don’t have an end in sight. Like, “What am I doing with my life if there’s no end?” Also, I’m good at letting go of things. If there’s a deadline, I’ll have something and it won’t be perfect, but that’s fine. I can call it done. And, also, I’ve always had a close friend whom I show everything I do to, and I know he is waiting and usually has feedback. That’s a big part of why I’ve been able to do things, I guess.

It’s definitely useful to have another set of eyes on things. If you trust the person, you’re curious to see what they say and come back with. They come back, and you can agree with some, disagree with some, but it’s still interesting to have that experience.

Absolutely. It happened with *acts of rebellion*. The album had 12 songs. It has 10 now. It was such a relief to have people weigh in on it. Like me asking, “Can you please tell me what you think of these other songs? I love them but I don’t think they fit on this record.” When I have no perspective anymore, it’s good to have that help.

I remember when I was thinking about the intro of the record, which had a sample in it. It was a sample from a philosophy podcast that talked about the music industry. A couple of friends said to me, “Maybe it’s too literal. Maybe you can leave the sample for live shows and not make it so literal on the record.” It was the same for a couple of other tracks, where I’d sampled other things. When I followed their suggestions and muted the samples it was beautiful how I could still hear the essence of what the samples said, but so much better—deeper even, because it wasn’t in your face literally spoken out. I like those tracks so much more now, and I would have never done that if it wasn’t for the feedback.

Subtraction works. I think about Raymond Carver, in that sense, and how Gordon Lish, his editor, just kept stripping his sentences down more and more, and that’s, in large part, how he developed his style. He helped him see what was there that he hadn’t realized.

I’ve been obsessed with that concept. I love minimalism. When I was playing drums, I used to hate drum fills, for example. [*laughs*] They’re often so unnecessary. When I was at Berklee, where I went to school for music, I was in class with mostly “dudes,” all drummers, and they used to play so much and also talk so much. They wouldn’t shut up ever. Neither talking or playing. I wanted to be the total opposite. So I got obsessed with, “What’s the least I can play as a drummer to make this song stand?” That’s what I do with my music, too. I step back.

Something that connects to a lot of what you’re saying is not to overthink things and to do things so they feel honest and natural. Is that your personality, or something you’ve had to work on as a musician?

It’s absolutely part of my personality, but over the past few years I’ve consciously worked on it. It’s probably what I work on the most in my music: Trying to stay away from fear, and thinking, and essentially not doing things out of anything else but instinct and heart.

It also connects to this idea of minimalism being more. To be a solo artist versus in a band. To find the way to maximize the effect by having the least amount of stuff going through it.

Exactly. The best musicians and writers are just being themselves. I’ve made music all my life, since I was nine. And I’ve never seen a more direct effect of what I do than I’ve seen since I’ve worked as Ela Minus. And I know it’s because I’m being vulnerable and honest in the songs and on the stage.

I remember during those first Ela Minus shows, being like, “I sound like shit.” I had no idea what i was doing and I know I sounded like shit, probably for at least the first two or three entire years. I didn’t know how to sing. I didn’t know how to mix myself. I was by myself—no one was there to help me or teach me. I could hear it, and it sounded really bad [*laughs*]. But somehow, for some reason, people connected to the fact that I was just up there

trying, giving it all I had. I think they saw themselves in it. You first connect as a human—they saw a girl on her own, on stage, trying to fucking figure out what she was doing. But being honest and free and being whatever she wanted. I think that's what connected with them. That's what I've learned. Like, "Oh shit, this is it isn't it? It doesn't matter how good I get at drums, or at anything else really, it's honesty isn't it, that makes things good?" You know?

Ela Minus Recommends:

1. There is no failure.
2. There is no success.
3. There is only make.
4. make.
5. make.

Name
Ela Minus

Vocation
Musician

Juan-Ortiz-Arenas