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# On the complicated business of how to be in a band

Guitarist, vocalist, and songwriter Eva Hendricks breaks down the financial history of her band, Charly Bliss, and discusses what it means to be a working musician in 2019.

“It was never supposed to be a real band... but then it ended up becoming what is now known as Charly Bliss.”

## **When did Charly Bliss officially begin?**

Charly Bliss officially began when I was a senior in high school back in 2011. I'd met [guitarist, vocalist] Spencer [Fox] and he sort of started encouraging me to write songs. Back then it just felt like an after school activity. I mean, it was fun, but it didn't feel like it was going anywhere. It just felt like something I was trying out. And then I was accepted into the Clive Davis department of recorded music at NYU and everyone else who had been accepted in the Facebook group already had a band or a project. They already had shows. I felt like a total fraud. I felt like I did not deserve to be accepted. So I felt like I had to get my shit together as quickly as possible so that I didn't show up there in the fall looking like a total idiot.

So we recorded the first EP that summer, and we enlisted the help of my brother and our friend Kevin [Copeland], who was playing bass. It was never supposed to be a real band. It was just supposed to be a temporary solution, but then it ended up becoming what is now known as Charly Bliss.

## **So, those first things that you recorded, you put them on Bandcamp?**

Yes, we put them on Bandcamp. They no longer exist for anyone to hear on Bandcamp and it's for the best. We started out like a Starbucks-core band or something. I grew up loving Rilo Kiley and the music of that time. That's where we started, and it has been a journey.

But yes, we put it out on Bandcamp and, honestly, Bandcamp is the best tool available to new artists. You can figure it out. Your parents' friends in Connecticut can figure it out. It is just easy to use.

**Do you remember the first time someone bought one of your songs?**

The weekend we put it out. I was already in school and I remember just watching the numbers. And being shocked! I was thinking that maybe like two people would see or hear it. I definitely have photos on Facebook of me being like, "Oh my god, 600 people listened to it!" That just blew my mind. And I that's when I really got the bug, thinking, "Oh, this could work." And then you have to just keep trying, and trying, and trying.

It was very slow. It was a long time before we played [live] for the first time. It wasn't until the end of that school year that we played in New York for the first time. Then that started me with a different bug, regarding performing. I'm a very competitive person and every time we would do something I would feel like I had a new goal, which was to beat what we did last. We booked two shows that summer at Pete's Candy Store. In my mind I was like, "We've made it. We're amazing!" There were so many New York venues then. In my mind I was like, "Oh, we'll know we've made it once we play X venue." And that goal was always changing. It kind of just started me being addicted to being in a band.

"We started making money when we put out what ended up being our first EP..."

**Do you remember the first time that you actually made some kind of money from Charly Bliss?**

It must've been from Bandcamp, and I think we put it immediately back into the band. We started making money when we put out what ended up being our first EP, which is called *Soft Serve*. That was the first physical release we ever put out. We had it pressed to vinyl, mostly because I had this amazing professor who told me to just do stuff and not look back. Things like, book a West Coast tour just to see if I could, and then press our record to vinyl just to show that we could. And that was really incredible because through BandCamp, we started to see orders coming in. Not just from our parents and their friends, but also from around the country.

And then from around the world, too. I don't know how it happened, but we had a couple of orders from Australia. We had a couple of orders in England. And that was incredible to me, even though I didn't understand how shipping works, and was grossly overpaying for shipping and not charging the right fees. I think I was charging people \$2 to have our records shipped to Australia. I didn't understand that part of it yet, but it was so gratifying. It didn't even matter if we were really still technically losing money; just to feel like there were people around the world and around the country who cared enough to buy it was so mind blowing.

**So you start playing shows around NYC. I assume you're getting paid some small amount?**

A tiny amount.

**You had merch to sell?**

Sort of. Slowly. I had a dream one night that we had a machine, like a coin-operated machine that would dispense our merch, like little Charly Bliss scrunchies and Charly Bliss pins. That could always be ready

and usable while we were on stage. We did that, and that went over really well. There were a couple of t-shirt attempts, some more successful than others. We tried to do it on our own, like do our own silkscreens. My really close friend Rebecca, who I lived with for a long time, is an incredible artist and she screen printed a lot of stuff for us. We were really trying to make it happen. For the first tour that we did on the West Coast, we sold tote bags and a record and a seven inch. And I think we probably did not break even, but even if it wasn't ultimately paying for what we did, it felt good that there was some money coming in.

We just felt so blindly excited. And that carried us through the first four years or so of being in a band. It wasn't really until we did a tour with Veruca Salt that it started to feel like we were a real band. And by then, we had managers and people who were helping and booking things. We were figuring out what it means to build a career rather than just randomly playing a bunch of shows around New York all the time.

**So, at that point you've made an EP, you've got your music on Bandcamp, you're booking shows, you have vinyl and merch to sell—but you're still paying for everything yourself.**

A thousand percent. One of the strangest experiences in my life was putting out *Soft Serve*. We worked for so long on it and we were so excited to put it out, but by the time it finally came out, it felt like nothing really connected. We saved up all our money and hired a publicist, but nothing really happened.

**"The world of publicity is really hard to understand if you haven't been through it..."**

**People often have a weird notion of what publicists can actually do for you.**

Yeah, completely. The world of publicity is really hard to understand if you haven't been through it. You do have to kind of go into it knowing that you can pay someone to be your publicist, but that does not even remotely guarantee that anyone will want to write about you or premiere your thing and that's no one's fault and no reflection whatsoever on the people you work with.

So we were like, "We're going to hire a publicist and then we're going to blast off. Everyone's going to hear our record." That kind of rocked our world. We're like, "Okay, that didn't happen." I was working at Roberta's at the time as a hostess, just feeling like, "I don't know what'll happen next." And then after a couple of months of the album being out—I will never know what happened or what changed—but I seriously felt like overnight people started calling me and texting me and DMing me on Twitter and and being like, "I love the band." I remember that *The Guardian* wrote an article about us. We were like, "Holy shit!" Basically the first people to reach out to us were booking agents, and it made sense to us to start there. We were like, "Hey, we love to play shows, we want to play more shows."

We were so hyped up to tour as much as we possibly could, so it felt like it made sense to have a booking agent first. That was a really positive thing for us. However, I'm a huge control freak, so it was the beginning of a couple of really tough transitions for me in that I was used to booking everything myself. I was also used to playing every weekend. Everyone will tell you, if you're starting to do well in New York, the best thing you can do is play less and not have people feel like, "Oh, if I miss them this weekend, I'll see them next week and whatever." That was a tough pill for me to swallow.

It's also confusing to have people you don't really know working for you. Sometimes you're like, "Oh, are they doing their job? Is this normal?" But then we got that Veruca Salt tour and I was kind of like, "Oh, shit, I guess we're on the right track." And that's where it started. We got a booking agent... then a lawyer... then management.

**This is probably something a lot of young bands don't totally understand. How does a booking agent and/or a manager make money from you?**

A booking agent makes money by helping you build up an audience. Your booking agent books the show, and they get their fee based off a percentage of what you made from the show. So it's in their best interest to grow your career and book you at good venues.

As for managers... well, for a long time when we would play New York, we would make, what? 100 bucks a show? For a manager to go in and be like, "I'm going to take 15% of \$100." That's such a dick move. Be suspicious of anyone who wants to take 15% of nothing. At the time when we first started with our managers, because we were so small, it was built in like, "We're not going to take a fee until you hit over this point."

Hopefully, you will be working with someone who believes in the bigger picture of what you're doing and isn't so caught up in the idea of, "I've gotta make my money off of absolutely everything you do immediately." You know, they're kind of like, "Well, it's all a balancing act. If you guys don't have any money in your bank account, how can you be touring this much? And living, and writing?" In theory, it's this very mutually beneficial relationship.

**And in theory, a booking agent is getting you these shows that you couldn't book for yourself. They're getting you on tours, they're getting you opening spots for bigger bands...**

That was really true for us. I mean, everything changed once we started working with a booking agent. We immediately booked the Veruca Salt tour. I look back on the first show of the tour, which was in Nashville, and it still blows my mind. It was the first time we played for anyone other than our parent and friends. And we played to a huge room full of people. Once again, I felt like I had the bug. I was like, *this is what this could be like?* Fuck. Yes, I want to continue.

**"Just because you have written 10 songs, it doesn't mean it's time to make a record."**

**So, your first full-length record, Guppy—the band did it on their own, right?**

We did make it ourselves and then eventually our label signed on after it had already been recorded.

**But you paid to make it?**

We not only paid to make it, we paid twice to make it twice. You know, my mom is such a great supportive influence in my life, and she's always like, "Just don't slow down, don't let anything slow you down. Even if no one's coming and offering money, you can figure it out. You're smart, make it work." Even though it was probably unwise, I was graduating from college and I was like, "We've got to make a record. We have 10 songs, it's time to make a record!" Which is a big mistake that a young band can make.

**How so?**

Just because you have written 10 songs, it doesn't mean it's time to make a record. Maybe when you've written 20 songs, it's time to make a record because then you can look back and say, "Well, these are the 10 best of that 20." Or even 15 songs—these are the 10 best of that 15.

When we first made the record, we didn't have managers. So, we were totally just going in blind. When our managers came on, they heard the record and were like, "It's good. Try writing new songs, maybe it's worth it to think about if you want those songs on the record."



@respectyouryoungers

We decided to record it again and we still didn't have a label. *Everyone* turned us down. I had packets of spreadsheets that listed every label you could ever imagine with notes like, "They heard it, they hated it, they don't get it. Pass, pass, pass." I mean, for months, it was like just getting heaps of that news. At a certain point, we were just ready to put it out ourselves.

**When you, as a band, said, "Okay, we're all in this together, we're a band. We're going to make this record, we're going to pay for it ourselves, we're going to put it out ourselves if we have to." How—and again this will be different for every band—but how do you decide how to shoulder the financial responsibility for that? Does everyone split it?**

Well, at the time that wasn't even possible. We were all students except for my brother, [drummer and songwriter] Sam. I had a job, I worked as a barista and a bartender. That wasn't making me that much money. My brother was working as a bartender and he was living in Connecticut with my parents. I will never forget, I had a phone call with him where I was like, "You've got to move to New York, the band's not going to work if you don't move to New York." And Sam says to me, "I'm just afraid to move to New York, Eva, I don't have that much money. I only have like, \$20,000 in my bank account." I was like, "Sam, I don't know one fucking person in New York with \$20,000 in their bank account. You will be rich here, you will be fine." I still barely know anyone with \$20,000. Certainly none of us have that in our bank accounts now.

So I kind of forced him into it. And to be honest, Sam financially covered a ton of stuff. He covered us getting a practice space and buying a P.A., buying our first round of records, the 7 inches of *Soft Serve*. It was really kind of him. We couldn't all split it but once again, it was that mentality of like, "No matter what you have to do, you do whatever it takes." The first time we recorded *Guppy*, I had a couple of hundred bucks I had gotten for my 21st birthday and I remember saying, "This is going towards our record." We were really just doing whatever we could to make it happen.

"The label search is very full of

wishy washy moments, of people being really excited, and then disappointment..."

**How did you end up signing with a label?**

At the very last minute, we heard from Barsuk, who were like, "Oh my god, we just heard the record and we love it and we want to put it out." It was refreshing, [because] the label search is very full of wishy washy moments of people being really excited, and then disappointment. I don't feel like I am a cynical person in any way other than in that realm of my life. When people are like, "Oh my god, I loved your record, it's so amazing. We should talk, we should have a meeting!" I'm like, "Yeah, okay." Like, whatever. It means nothing to me. I heard that a million times.

I was super attracted to the fact that they really seemed like they were ready to go. So, that came together really quickly. At that point, you have to understand, we felt like we were waiting to get to that point for years. And it's true, we were waiting for that for years because between recording the record twice, and writing it, it had just been trying and trying and trying.

So we talked to them, got on the same page as them, and we were really excited by the other bands they worked with. They reimbursed us for what we had paid to make *Guppy* the second time, so that was great. Then they helped us with marketing and things we had never had before. It felt so good to have a partner with us, making this record.

**I think a lot of people who are coming to this very green, look at the landscape of music and look at the resources they have and are like, "Why shouldn't I just do this myself? Why do I need a label?" What did the label give you that you couldn't have done yourself?**

First of all, I think that's a totally valid way to feel. Right now everyone is kind of addressing this idea. You see so many bands doing it themselves, even at different levels. Chance the Rapper famously does not work with a label and has no interest in ever working with a label. There are certain artists that do it differently, like Kim Petras, who's my current hero in music. She's very much in charge of her own stuff. I think she worked with a distribution company and just does it that way because she wants to have control over how she releases her singles and what she puts out. I totally respect that.

We were total nobodies, no one knew who the fuck we were and the label had a lot of really great input on the marketing of the record and how to get it out to people who would never have otherwise purchased it. I am a control freak, and I love being part of the business side of things, the management side of things, but I also felt super aware that I had totally exhausted what I was able to fake it on.

So it was really helpful to me to be working with people who I felt were really ambitious and wanted to get the record out to as many people as possible. They brought it to a lot of people who otherwise might not have heard it. The music industry is changing super quickly. I don't know where it's all heading. No one really knows where it's all headed. All you can do in real time is assess who you're working with and whether it feels like what they have to offer is necessary to you. It is totally valid to put a record out yourself.

"This is going to be our lives now."

**And you bought a van?**

We really considered doing the Veruca Salt tour in our mom's Honda Odyssey. We were planning to do that. Then, the Honda Odyssey broke down a week before the tour. My boyfriend at the time had recently tried to buy a van, five days before a tour, and it blew up in his face in the most epic way possible. I had always felt like, "Oh, if we buy a van, I'm going to put so much research into it, I am going to really figure out what the best one is. We're not going to be stupid about it." Well, that was total bullshit because we just had to make it happen five days before the tour, so we bought a lime green Ford Econoline. Super used. When they sold it to us in Connecticut, everyone who worked at the used car dealership kept saying to the guy we were working with, "You sold that fucking thing, I can't believe you fucking sold that!" It was hideous but it was ours. I think the idea was from our managers. They have always been the people to push us to think bigger. Make the investment, because if you invest, you are saying to yourself and to the universe, "This is going to be our lives now." We are not just renting a van and seeing how this is going to go. No, we are buying this van. We are committed.

**So, after the touring cycle for that record, Guppy, eventually it becomes time to make another record. At this point, you have a booking agent, you have a manager, you have a record label...**

Also, a lawyer and a publicist.

**So, you have a team. At that point are you mostly making money from touring and playing shows?**

We recouped *Guppy* in a year and I am really proud of that. But yeah, certainly the majority of our income is from touring and selling merch.

**So, when it came time to do the second record, what was that process like? Does the label want to hear demos? Do they want to talk to you about what you think the direction of it's going to be because they are going to pay for it? And then with the understanding that since they are paying for the making of it, you as the artist are going to have to recoup that later on?**

Yes. So, any money that comes, even if it feels like, "Oh my god, they're giving us X amount of money, oh my god, we have so much money to record!" That money isn't really your money until you make it back on what you sell off the record.

**So, those are all things to consider. The kind of record you want to make, the kind of record that the label wants you to make, how much everybody's willing to spend on it...**

Yeah. We felt very strongly that we wanted to make the record that we wanted to make. Even if our label wasn't able to give us the money that we needed to make that record, we were willing to dip into what we earned that otherwise might have gone to paying us out and paying for our lives, in order to make the record we wanted to make. We were willing to do anything we had to do to make the record we wanted to make.

**"Being a working musician is complicated. It's not that easy."**

**So, you made this record, it came out, everyone loved it. Here's the thing that I think can feel like smoke and mirrors, especially younger bands. I think people assume, "Oh, you made it big, they did a Pitchfork cover story on you, you got all this press, you must be making a lot of money." But that's not always the case.**

I still think that way about artists I love as well. Even artists who are my friends. I'll see something they get in the press and be like, "Oh my god, they must be set now, they're fine." But it is smoke and mirrors. In a different era of music, that might have been true, but not now. Something that I feel was really lucky for me was that when I was in college I worked with Lizzie Goodman, who was at the time writing her book, *Meet Me In The Bathroom*, and I transcribed a lot of the interviews for that book. That was really eye opening to me. Those were the bands that I grew up with, The Strokes and The Yeah Yeah

Yeas and Franz Ferdinand.

You just realize that being a musician is a career just like any other. You are hearing that there are people who struggled financially, even when you're looking at them on MTV and they seem so huge. Being a working musician is complicated. It's not that easy, it's not like, "Oh, you got this thing and now it's all figured out and you're set." People sign really bad deals, people spend more money than they have, people assume the wave is gonna last forever.

**People also assume that if you're playing lots of festivals that you must be making so much money. Once everyone else gets paid, what's left to split among the band isn't always very much.**

It's so sad. You know, there are these victory moments where it's like, "Oh my god, this is the highest guarantee we've ever had, this is the highest fee we've ever gotten off a show!" For something like playing Splendor in the Grass in Australia, that was incredible. That festival is huge and we were so blown away. Still, there's a lot that goes into getting four band members to Australia, plus our manager, plus we had to have someone who could drive us around. All of those expenses counteract that fee, even if it feels really high. It's like, "Oh, well what are we actually walking away with at the end of this?" We split everything from touring equally, which I think you have to do. So, that money is then split that four ways... and it quickly dwindles.

That's not even factoring in other things. It's amazing to think, "Oh, you tour and all of the money you make off of touring will go directly to your bank account." But after you pay your manager, after you pay your booking agent, plus whoever else needs to be paid their fees, which they obviously deserve, from the shows that you play, it's really tempting to think that the rest of that money is split four ways between us and we all walk away with it, but that's not even true. A lot of the time you have bills that you have to pay, you have to pay the manufacturer who made your merch that you sold at the show, you have to pay for gas, you have to pay for the hotels that you stayed in, which is something we mostly avoided for years, but now we do.

We don't stay in nice hotels, but when you're touring as much as we are—sometimes we are away for three months at a time—we need sleep. There are certain things you have to do, where you're like, "Okay, I wish we could still kind of justify staying on people's floors." But, you can't really, that just doesn't make sense anymore. So, *all of that* goes into draining what you made from this show as well. And then what's left over after all of that, after all of your gas money and whatever, is what you're going home with.

**Now people are always talking about getting syncs. Get your song on a TV show. There's an entire industry just around that stuff. Does Charly Bliss have a sync person?**

Yes. That was new for us this year. They're a publisher. Our publishing company.

**So, publishing companies have people working in that division, people who are working exclusively to get their artists songs placed on television or film.**

Yes. Sometimes when people sign with a label, the label also has a publishing division and sometimes you can get a better advance if you sign on both sides.

**And if they get one of your songs placed on a show, they also get a percentage of whatever fee they have negotiated for you.**

Yes. They make a percentage, your label makes a percentage, you make a percentage, and your managers make a percentage.

**"There is nothing more important to me than our relationships within**



the band.”

**Miki Berenyi—formerly of Lush—wrote an essay for TCI about the ups and downs of being in a band. One of the things she cites as a source of tension in her band had to do with how they divided up the publishing. I feel like that’s a conversation that bands need to have early on when they make a record. How do we handle publishing? Who wrote this song? Who gets credit? And how much?**

It’s really hard. Figuring out the publishing is by far the most complicated part of being in a band. In our band we are four best friends, and we have been best friends since we were 11. And my brother is in the band. When we first started out as a band, I think there was a huge temptation to say, “Everything is equal.” And, I respect bands who do it that way. I think the complicated thing about doing it that way is that, if that’s not a true reflection of the writing, I don’t believe it’s smart for anyone to be really swallowing something that they feel is not fair because that stuff always comes up eventually.

As a member of Charly Bliss, I don’t know if I would feel differently if I was in a different band with different people. If it was people who I had just met in college or something. Maybe I would feel differently. The most important thing to me in Charly Bliss, always, will be that the four of us, no matter what, are always close and never resent each other. Part of being in a band is that we also run a business together, so, to say that we will never rub each other the wrong way or that we’ll never have tension is crazy. It happens. Still, I don’t care to be in a band if it means I lose my relationship with my brother. I don’t care to be in a band if it means I am not friends with Spencer and Dan anymore. It doesn’t matter to me that much.

So, I don’t think the way to do that is to just say, “Blanket statement, it’s always *this*.” I think the way to do that is to make people feel like they are being appropriately compensated and the work that they do is being represented in those numbers. So, I’ll just say that we’ve tried a thousand different equations and I think it took us trying a thousand different equations to figure out one that worked for us.

“I wouldn’t change anything. A lot of being in a band is being willing to dive in and make mistakes.”

**Are there things about all of this that you wish you had found out earlier on?**

I think of Charly Bliss as the biggest learning experience of my life, and that is ongoing. That continues to be true. Even if I had known certain things, I would still have done everything the same way. Though, there’s certainly tips that now I feel I can give to younger artists that might have been helpful to me.

For me, it’s always that I am super hard on myself and I always think that I am not as good as everyone else, and I think I held myself back for a long time because I was scared. I was almost scared to even try, because I felt like I was coming to it late. I didn’t really know how to play guitar, I didn’t really know how to write songs. It took me a long time to find my confidence, and I feel a little silly about that now. I wish someone would have been like, “Get over your fear and keep working at it. Don’t wait for some divine inspiration to come to you. It’s a job and you need to work at it and treat it that way.”

Again, I’ve learned so much and I feel so grateful for Charly Bliss in the sense that your life is always changing. No matter what’s going on in my personal life, I do feel like we’ve hit a point with Charly Bliss where I look at it as this very solid thing that I’ve built with my friends. I can look at the band and I feel so proud.

Have we made mistakes? 1,000%, but I think the thing you have to really watch out for, the thing I am proud that we have always watched out for, was our relationships and making sure we never ruined those. We love each other.

An Intro To Charly Bliss:

Soft Serve (2014)

Guppy (2017)

Heaven (2018)

Young Enough (2019)

Name

Eva Hendricks

Vocation

Vocalist, Guitarist, Songwriter

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