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As told to Emma Bowers, 2404 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Inspiration.

# On learning from things that go wrong

Musician Fenne Lily discusses working with your imperfections, the value of early independence, and not being afraid to make big decisions. **Things sometimes go wrong in creative projects. As a creative person, things can be a bit more of a mess than you'd like them to be. I'm curious how you've approached situations like this within your creative practice.**

For this last record, a lot of things went wrong, including, but not limited to, the mic that I recorded everything on being broken. We had to re-record all of the vocals, and then there were some major issues with mixing. My instinct when things go wrong is to start again. But obviously you can't start a...Well, you could start a record again, but better to not do that. So we just started stripping everything back to the absolute core essential parts—building every song back up from rerecorded vocals and just acoustic guitar and starting kind of bare bones.

When I'm tidying my house, I almost make it worse before I make it better. If there's clothes on the floor, I'll just put all my clothes on the floor and then I'll start from there. I'm really bad at asking for help with everything, hence why I didn't not have wifi in my old house because I didn't want it. I didn't have it because I didn't know how to get it, and I didn't know who to ask, and then I didn't ask and I didn't have it. So yeah, Making more of a mess, making everything smaller and gradually growing it, and asking for help when you can't do it are all pretty good [approaches when things go wrong], I think.

**Is there anything that you think is a little better for the mess, on the latest record?**

There's a song called "Henry" on the record that was initially a guitar song, and I had a bunch of layered tracks on it, and it was almost like...I don't know, if Cocteau Twins were less cool. It was just a lot going on. It got to the point where I was like, "This is so cluttered that I don't remember how this song began. This is a lot." And my instinct was to do what I said, where we took everything away and just left it as a guitar song, but we actually did the opposite. We chose the messiest parts and kept those. You know when you're just throwing stuff at the wall being like, "Let's just see if the least logical conclusion is the one that will work."

No one should ever put reverb on a snare is my hot take, but we did that and we kept it. Then we kept this really janky piano that was definitely out of tune, and we kind of tuned everything to the dodgy piano. Then that's the version that worked. It sounds great. It's one of my favorite songs now.

Another example is there's a whole song that isn't on the record. When I wrote it, I thought this would be the linchpin of the record. Thematically and sonically and structurally, I thought this is the one that will inspire the decision making on the rest of the songs. We recorded it three separate ways over two months, and it never was right, and it was a mess. I cut my losses and decided to just not put it on the record, and I'm really glad that I didn't, because thematically and sonically and structurally, it actually wasn't the focal point for the rest of the writing. It was almost like an outlier from the start, which made me think it was better, but I actually think it derailed the message of the record and the sonic decisions that were made on the record would've been undermined by this song being on it.

So I think that that's a positive thing to come out of a mess that actually couldn't be solved. Not everything can be fixed and that's equally fine. I think that that's sometimes good to remember, too.

**The philosophy of tuning everything else to the out-of-tune piano is an interesting lens for creativity and changing direction. Does that feel like something that has happened in your career often?**

Altering everything to fit around the thing that can't be changed? Yeah. I never had guitar lessons, I'm not a great guitarist. So to work around the simple fact that I actually cannot get my head around putting my fingers in many different positions, I just tune it differently. I keep the same shape basically, but I tune the guitar to a different tuning. I feel like when you see someone doing extensive tuning at a show, you're like, "Wow, they must really have their shit together. They're so good at guitar that they can't bring themselves to play in a regular tuning anymore because they've run out of ideas." No, it's probably what I'm doing where they just don't want to think about another workaround for being kind of skill-less.

**What about while working through the dregs of the industry, with labels or publishing or touring?**

I mean, my first record was self-released due to the fact that nobody wanted to sign me. That actually turned out to be a really cool thing that gave me a sense of independence that is still useful now that I'm not independent. I think that, "Oh, there's nobody in the office for this long weekend to make this piece of visual material, me and my manager will do it. There's not enough budget to get this certain thing for a music video, I'll just ask anyone and everyone I know for ideas around it."

I just made a music video and I was being given loads of suggestions for directors and studios to shoot it in and all this stuff, and it started to sound and feel a little bit too professional for the way that I like to do things. I was being asked about wardrobe and what kind of makeup ideas I had. And I was like, "This is making me into somebody that I'm not," so me and my roommate decided that we would do it, and he produced it and I directed it and we got a team of friends together and we shot it. I think the immovable problem was the fact that I didn't know what I wanted and I also wanted complete control, and we just fit everything around to those two facts and it worked.

**You recently moved to Brooklyn and have been navigating being a working musician between two countries. I'm curious about what that's been like for you—your inspiration behind the move, practicalities, if you have any suggestions or wisdom for someone looking to do something similar.**

The main reason why I left England is I lived in Bristol for five years and I loved living there and the music scene there is non-competitive and grassroots and everyone's just doing their own thing and helping each other up and it really feels like a community. Having said that, it's a community of music genres that I'm not involved with, and I always felt a little bit out of place. Not in the way that I was doing things, but simply just what I was doing.

I moved because everything I listen to was made here. I started a radio show in lockdown just for something to do and I found so many small labels and artists that were based here in the states and now some of my friends here are people that I played on the radio show. It just felt like if I was here, I wouldn't be thinking about being anywhere else. Which is something that I've always struggled with, trying to be happy somewhere, but thinking potentially there's somewhere where I would feel more comfortable or more understood or more supported or whatever. So that was the main reason, and so far it has absolutely lived up to what I thought it would be like. Which is great because that usually doesn't happen.

I honestly wish I'd done it sooner. I don't think I'm in a position to give anyone advice about anything, but I've wanted to move here since...we did an Andy Shauf tour, I think, in 2019. Maybe it was in 2018, I don't know. But as soon as I got home to England, I was like, "I don't want to be here." But I stayed three more years and I wish I hadn't. I never regret leaving a movie that I don't like. I never regret leaving a relationship I don't like. And so far I've never regretted leaving a place that I have outgrown. But I do regret the time that it takes for me to get to that decision. And it feels like a big thing, but it's really not. I can go home at any time. It's a six-hour flight, it's not a big deal. So yeah, things are scary until they're not anymore.

**Has being in New York changed your creative practice at all?**

I see things in a seasonal way. So right now I'm in the "getting ready for the record to come out" season and talking about and reflecting on it. I don't feel like I'm necessarily in a writing headspace. Having said that, I was living in a house share since September where I felt really invaded by that room. Not by the other people, just because it was on a busy road and I always felt like I wasn't still or focused and I felt stressed out there. We moved into this new house a week ago and for three nights this week I have chosen to stay in, which is not something I usually do, and sit on the floor and play guitar, and that is so exciting to just subconsciously want to be back in my instrument with my voice, with my thoughts, at a time where it doesn't feel pressing.

I think I work off the idea that if I have to do it, I will do it, and if I don't, I'll put it off. That is always my attitude, which is a bit bad. But I feel inspired by light, this house is very light, quiet, and having trees nearby...at least a tree. I'm not a hippie. I really actually actively hated living in the countryside.

I grew up in the countryside. But just seeing something else growing that isn't a person is very comforting and makes me feel small in a nice way. New York's great because everyone is neurotic and busy and ready to have a big conversation all the time. Or they're not and they're honest about it. I love that. I felt crazy when I was living in Bristol because I couldn't be alone around people. I was either completely alone or around people. In New York, you can just feel like a small piece of a big puzzle and still not be lonely. It's really good. It's good for my brain.

I've followed you on Twitter for the last few years and have always found you as someone who is in equal measure very intelligent and well-spoken, and then really good at cracking a joke and finding levity. I wonder if there's any art or media that inspires you when it comes to humor?

I have said this on multiple occasions privately and I never thought I would say it and it be documented forever, but I know I was raised by my parents—but I feel I was partially raised by *Broad City*. Those two women are a perfect example of people that are every kind of intelligent and have such a good grasp of what is funny and what is appropriate. It was also a really cool example that I hadn't seen before of a show where the main characters are women and it's not competitive. There's no real dating stories. It's purely about them trying to get by and be kind to each other and it's so funny.

That crossover between being able to take yourself and other people seriously while also recognizing that everyone is stupid and you are also stupid and you have a lot to learn feels important. I started listening to Sarah Silverman's podcast in lockdown and she has this perfect way of giving an answer—an enlightening take or a rude, dismissive take on something—and then being like, "But I'm talking out of my ass." It's so relaxing to be around someone who is clearly sharp and leads a...what's the word that she uses...an examined life," while also kind of being like a child.

Fenne Lily Recommends:

I met Ellen Kemper of Palehound recently and they have a **magic eight-ball** in their house and I could not put it down. I don't buy into astrology because I'm seriously British and we don't agree with that way of thinking. But the magic eight-ball...I feel it might become almost like a talisman or something I use to guide myself through life now.

Linked in a big way to the magic eight-ball is the game of **pool, or billiards**, I don't know what anyone calls it. That I've been greatly enjoying. I never had a hobby before I moved here and then I decided that I would have a hobby and I picked pool, and that's all I do now.

My partner got me a **Cindy Sherman photography book**, because we went to see an exhibition of hers. It's called Centerfolds. She did these long, huge photos of her kind of looking like a movie star in loads of different wigs and stuff. That book is really cool, and her work in general. Until she gets creepy. As she's got older, she's got scarier, which I think is cool, but I like her early stuff.

Reading a book called Teenager by Bud Smith. It's amazing. The author is a construction worker, and the book is about two kids that run away from home and have a road trip. It's very good.

An album I've been listening to a bunch is Love the Stranger by a band called Friendship. It came out last year and I listen to it all the time. I'm not bored of it. It's perfect.

Name

Fenne Lily

Vocation

musician


Fact


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