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On adapting to difficult times

Musician, organizer, and activist Holly Rankin—aka Jack River—on balancing her life as a musician with working on climate change, maintaining an identity outside of your creative work, and why we should never underestimate our power to learn new things and change the world around us.

Where are you right now?

I'm in Mollymook, Australia. It's three hours south of Sydney. So I'm just at home, which is where I work when I'm not touring. This is obviously a pretty devastating time for people in our industry, so there's been a lot of freaking out at the moment, trying to figure out what we are gonna do next, and what we can do for all these people who work behind the scenes on all of our projects.

Just to give people a little context—you were about to head to the states with your band to play some shows at SXSW when the coronavirus brought everything to a halt.

Yes. We were three days out from traveling and then just decided to pull the pin. In some ways, we were lucky. So many other artists were traveling or were stranded. In some ways, it's almost like a healthy exposure of our industry, really. It exposes how many problems our industry currently has. In Australia we just don't have the kind of artist unions, or unions for contractors, to keep everyone covered in the slightest, or to have any kind of representation. So yeah, it's a big wake-up call.

This has been a particularly wild year for you. Before this, you had a very close call with the wild fires in Australia, right?

The fires came to the forest edge here, just a very short distance from my home. So yeah, it's been absolutely insane. There were deaths only 20 minutes up the road from us with the fires, and lots of friends have lost their homes all around us. So yeah, it's been overwhelmingly insane.

Like a lot of musicians, not only are you unable to tour right now, you're also not able to even really leave your home. In this very particular cultural moment, what can you do to take care of yourself? How do you start to think about what would or should happen next?

Well firstly, my team and I are thinking of the obvious impacts to all the people that we work with and that work for us. We're in the position of being the actual business that holds all of this work together. So what can we do for our contractors? That's something that we're immediately trying to figure out right now. That is our number one priority. Then, on a greater level, with all the time that it looks like our industry is going to have now, we're just going straight into activation mode of making plans, so whenever it is ok for people to come back and start doing things, we'll be ready for that.

I'm gonna be writing another album, so it's good to have some extra time for that, but I'm also looking to make a podcast, and to make a little book to go out with my next album. So, we're just like, "What can we do that's not touring that we've always wanted to do?" Luckily I'm really interested in those things and in doing different creative things around my touring schedule, so that's cool. But I think the most important thing is to look at the vulnerable jobs in our industry and try to help those people. It's not all about the fun stuff that you can do with this sudden amount of free time.

In addition to making music, you've been doing work around climate change and equality around festival bookings for a long time. How did you get involved in doing that kind of work?

Well, since before I entered the music industry as an 18-year-old, I always had an interest in

sustainability and economics and politics. I was always thinking about what we needed to do differently as a race. And then I went off to establish my music career, which is awesome, but it has taken me a good eight or nine years to actually establish. I was always thinking about ways I could pursue all of these things at the same time.

As a musician, particularly in the early days, you've got a lot of time. I took that time and created a festival in my hometown, because I grew up in a country town where there was absolutely nothing going on. Nobody comes to visit, bands don't play there. Nobody still comes to visit unless they're coming through our festival or going on holidays. At the time there was an awesome sustainability movement in my hometown, so we just put them together and created a festival—a festival centered around sustainability—and that was my first go at creating something outside of my music career.

Since then I've just been looking at ways to act upon things I see that need to change. So we created Electric Lady in early 2017, and that had a really cool local impact on our industry here. It was an alert to say, "Hey, all the stats are out on radio and festivals, on playlists, and we need to change that, we need more women on these stages." Obviously, that was part of a much bigger global movement that I feel, at least now in Australia, has really shifted those numbers.

I think it's awesome now to have an opportunity to collaborate with people and do interesting things in the climate space. That's been my long-term life dream, to join climate activism and environmental activism with music. It's also a big reason why I wanted to become a musician, because I saw that musicians really do have so much impact in this space, and young people trust them more than they trust politicians. And I think it is a really important space to be in, working in a professional way to get people the right information and do things like create climate concerts, but do it in a really informed way. That's where I'm at now, and I want to find the most impactful ways to do that.

It's inspiring to see how many artists—particularly young artists—have become empowered in regards to these issues, whether it's insisting on equality when it comes to festival bills or asking that venues at least make an attempt to operate in a healthier, more sustainable way. I think it was surprising to a lot of people that you could actually ask for those things and people would pay attention.

Totally. A lot of artists don't realize the power that they have. Because a lot of them have been so focused on just making music, which is their job, and then all of a sudden they realize they've got people's attention. It's an awesome power, especially now, when public opinion is so exposed and important. It's just important that you know what to do with that power and you try and use it in the right way. I'm happy to see so many artists in Australia right now who are really trying to do that. You see more people insisting on things like an inclusion rider. When they are booked for something they can say, "Here's my tech rider and here's my inclusivity or equality rider." So that's great, you know?

As someone who is doing all of these different things, what does the landscape of your creative life typically look like? Do all of these pursuits neatly dovetail together?

Yeah, I've got an awesome team now. Well, a team on two sides, really. There is the team that works on the festivals specifically, like Grow Your Own and Electric Lady projects, and then I have my Jack River team, who are also really understanding. I guess it's taken a while to put the right team together that understands what I want to do and have them equally as passionate about it, and now I really do have that.

How do you tend to work?

I usually carve out 9:00 to 11:00 in the morning to just write and try and be creative, and not stress out yet about anything. And then from then on it's a little bit of everything, whatever feels the most urgent. It's kind of awesome and quite a creative work flow, because we'll be talking about something I'm doing in climate work for an hour, and then switch into, "What are we doing with the next album?" What I love about that is that those two things inform each other. The album I'm making next year is very informed by what I want to do in the climate space, and that's where I've always wanted to be. So yeah, they're speaking to each other, and finally it's making some sense.

Australia has always felt like its own cultural ecosystem, particularly in regards to music, mostly because it's so hard—financially and logistically—for artists from the rest of the world to come and play there. Do you feel like that is changing?

It's a limited country in that way. Obviously our population is sparsely distributed, and we don't have cultural centers in regional areas as much as you guys do in the states because of your population. Especially when you're a band visiting for the first time, you're only visiting the capital cities of each state, in which there's maybe only six viable places to go and play, and then we have a limited number of major festivals where you're actually going to get proper pay. And you can't really drive between these places because they're too far away from each other, so you've got to fly.

I think that the festival market is changing for the better, but it also means that there's more competition. So we've got lots of cool festivals in regional areas, like the one I started, but I think everywhere there's been a bit of a festival boom. And now some of them, especially this year, are going to suffer, so I don't know what will happen. As artists it's the same for us trying to get out of Australia. Once we make it over to you guys or over to the UK there's so many amazing places to play, and it's kind of mind-bending for us little convicts here on this giant island.

You just put out an EP and were about to embark on a promotional tour and now, as is the case for so many

artists, that has been put on hold indefinitely due to forces beyond your control. How do you deal with that? Do you just put that thwarted energy into making something new?

Yeah well, I guess we're all in the same boat now. We can't do gatherings here of more than a few people because of coronavirus, same as you folks in New York. So, we're basically just pulling up stocks and staying put. Also, most people should know that on an insurance level, nothing is being covered because of this. It's like the Wild West everywhere now, everyone just scrambling to survive.

So, apart from all the negatives—and those are big negatives—I'm pretty okay to just have some time to actually work on an album and a book, or other creative projects. We don't really get that time very often. It's hard to be grateful for it, given the circumstances, but that's how I'm trying to look at it. I haven't had time off in a couple of years for more than two days or something, so it's secretly exciting to me. You are being forced to take this time off now, to pause *everything*—what will you do with it?

For someone who is interested in getting involved in some kind of climate activism, what do you suggest? I feel like there are probably a lot of people who'd like to reduce their footprint and be a better advocate for change, but maybe don't know where to start.

In the States you guys have probably far more resources than us to figure it out, to be honest. But here in Australia we have an independent climate change body that's headed up by professional scientists who have worked for the government, et cetera. It's called the Climate Council. So in Australia, that's where I tell people to go, because it's independent information that is not a media outlet. It's a bunch of scientists who are spreading the correct information. I tell people to get in touch with them.

I think a lot of creatives and artists feel scared to step into the realm of science, but there's so many amazing skills that you have as an artist, whether that is talking to people, or understanding things creatively, or content creation and information distribution, that can help in that realm. I just tell people not to hold back because they might be intimidated, to educate themselves, and to realize that they might have more to offer in this kind of work than they realize. Everyone needs to be a part of this mass understanding of this issue.

You started your own festival, which is a massive undertaking. What was the learning curve to putting on a festival, and also trying to have it be about sustainability, so you're not just repeating these mistakes of other festivals?

Totally. God, well... it's so hilarious, the undertaking of a festival, because you grow up with this dream of what a festival is and you're driven by it, and then you make one and your understanding of a festival is flipped completely in the other direction. It's like, "Oh, wow." Because you're taking a couple of thousand young people into a space, you're taking on the liability for their health, wellbeing, and their lives, and you're outlaying huge amounts of money, and it's all dependent on the weather. Throw in the police and the council and electricity and water and toilets and yeah, it's not the dream that people imagine at all.

It's such a messy, complicated thing that, if I was super smart maybe I wouldn't have started, but I did. We're all casualties of dreaming. But I love what it has taught me. In any industry you're going to be driven by a vision and a dream, and that is a real thing, we all share in the feeling. It's just that realizing those dreams is always going to be hard work.

I think if you have persistence and perseverance to get through those messy details of doing even just a tiny festival, if you can persevere and then *still* have the vision and dream at the end of it, then you've learned a really cool skill that you can take elsewhere. You can take those skills and apply them to climate work or politics, or even to an innovation department in a business. They're really weird skills, but valuable. So that's what I hope to have taken from the experience.

You have a long-standing music project, Jack River, that you've been working on for nearly a decade now. Given that the project is 100% yours, I'm curious why it's called Jack River and not just Holly Rankin. Why was it important to have that distinction between you and the project?

I've always had names for my music, since high school. I've had three different band situations, and I think for some reason I felt a little isolated in the beginning, whether it was because I was a girl wanting to do gritty guitar music or whatever, I don't know. But I wanted to be in a band and have people around, though I was writing everything and doing everything myself. So it might've stemmed from that place of wanting to feel like it's not just me, I'm part of something bigger.

And then I had to realize at a certain point that no, it was my project. I needed to go it alone, and then that's when I created Jack River. My songwriting is pretty normal, but the production stuff inside my head is quite strange, and it does strange things to my brain when I'm doing it. So I always wanted to just have that stuff be separate to Holly, to me. I like to know that it's another place to go, and that it can't be judged and I can't judge it as I might judge myself.

Also, coming from a small town where anyone would know you, you're often just kind of ridiculed for doing music. I think that would have played into it too, just having the separation. Like Holly is still all good if this doesn't work out. And now I'm 10 years down the track since I started doing music, I'm happy to have that separation because it's such a weird kind of career that's so self-centered, and if that was all on me I'd feel crazy.

I'm sure it's not easy to juggle doing all these things and to maintain all these different kinds of projects, even if they do support each other in some way, but I think sometimes people take for granted just how much we're capable of doing if we want to. It's like, "Oh, if I'm making music I don't have time to think about anything else," or, "I can't take on these other projects and do this." I think it's kind of refreshing to be reminded that if you want to, you really can do a lot.

Exactly! I think it's super healthy, especially in music, to have other passions. The music business is quite a weird, self-centered, and social media-driven world, and I could not really cope with that unless I had other ways to work with people, and other things constantly refreshing my point of view. It's really nice to mess with your own context and have multiple things going on. Whether it's having an outside job, or studying, I think it's cool to keep refreshing your context and perspective, because it can get just way too weird. Right now in particular is maybe the time to step away from that part of our lives that isn't actually real and focus on who we really are.

Yes. Maybe this is the reset that no one asked for or particularly wanted, but it's an opportunity to reset nonetheless. It may feel too soon for some people to start thinking about what's the silver lining of all this, but if it is a moment for everybody to really be forced to pause and think about what it is they're trying to do and why they're doing it, and what their motivations are for doing it, and how going forward it could be done differently maybe, then that has got to be a healthy thing.

Oh, a million percent. I totally agree. It's scary, but it's as if someone asked us all, "Well, what would you do if you had several months to yourself to do whatever you want to do?" And that's a pretty cool question, and people get to try and answer it right now.

Holly Rankin Recommends:

I take Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass with me everywhere I go. For me, just having flowing poetry about nature on hand if I'm traveling in cities is so important. It is also a break from the language of 2020. Having some really beautiful language close by is nice.

Angel Olsen's record, My Woman. It's been in my car so long, I listen to it every day. I also love her song "White Fire," which is just so cleansing. I play it whenever I feel confused and strange.

This might sound dumb, but go buy a science magazine. What do you guys have in the states, Scientific American or something? New Scientist? It's just so good to refresh on the insane technologies and insane findings of science, and people working in a similar field of uncertainty as the music industry on deep concepts like we do as artists. I think it's cool to trip yourself out.

The three main things I do to take care of myself...first, go for a swim in the ocean. I know that's hard for a lot of Americans, you guys aren't all necessarily close, but you should do it if you can. Also, I see a kinesiologist. She's a next level, super complex energy worker, and she's my go-to. She's so smart. Never underestimate these people. I also see a naturopath. So between those two women in my life, I am always in tune. if I'm at a point where I need a refresh, I'll go book in with both of them. It's important to have people like this in your life, who can help take care of you on a body and mind level.

Name

Holly Rankin


Vocation


Musician, Organizer, Activist


Fact

Nina Elm

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