

On starting out and making a name for yourself



Musician and songwriter Fusilier on moving to New York City to make it as an artist, what it means to make a name for yourself, and why it's important to celebrate and articulate joy.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2629 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Beginnings](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Adversity](#).

You're in the middle of living that classic story of a young artist who runs away to New York City to make it big. Why did you decide to move here?

A lot of people I knew were leaving Atlanta. I had a couple of friends who were ready to move to LA, but I didn't want to. I thought LA was scary, spiritually, so I moved to New York instead. I think I fit better here. It's just more gray and everything seems to be more about the work and the craft. Then it seemed like everyone in Atlanta and their mom was moving to New York, so it was like, "Okay, I guess I'll do it, too." It's been good, but it took me a while to find my people here.

Did you make music when you were a kid? Did you always know that was your path?

It's always been music. I didn't know if I would be doing it professionally or what that would mean, but music was always the thing. I remember riding the school bus and the bus driver would play the radio on the bus. Everyone else would be listening or singing along, but I'd be writing down my own lyrics to the songs. I didn't know why I was doing it, but I was just drawn to it.

Making music was sort of like being in a trance—I would zone out and improvise. Growing up, my first instrument was the violin, so I love classical music and orchestra. But as a teenager I played bass. I started writing songs when I was 15 or 16. I picked up a bass and just started. I wrote some laughably worded teenage diatribe, one of those things where it's a three-minute song with three paragraphs worth of lyrics.

You went from playing in other people's bands to eventually doing your own solo project. What was the impetus to strike out on your own?

I was second in command in my best friend's band, playing bass, and the band was touring a lot and doing well. We were on a Canadian tour and there was this one song that I wrote and sang on that we would play during our set. People started coming up to me after the show and saying, "Why don't you sing more? You should do that. Your stuff really sounds great." Initially, I just brushed it off, or I just felt bad, because my friend was the lead singer. But like with a lot of ideas, someone says something to you and it plants a seed, which later sprouts. When we got back from the tour, I was already working on my first solo EP and I just decided to just go for it—to give all of my energy to doing my own thing. I mean, are all of those strangers gonna be wrong? I knew I had a voice, but I truly didn't know how to use it yet.

With your current project, are you doing everything yourself?

Initially it was all me. I wanted to prove that I didn't need to be somebody's second in command. Eventually I brought in people, though. We got some horn players to play the things that I wrote, and my friend on drums, but I wrote pretty much everything. I think I see my music now as a more collaborative experience headed up by one person. I've been working on a lot of music that I'm super excited about with that model. But at the beginning I needed to prove it to myself, that I was the real deal, and that I could do this.

So I'm still mainly focused on my solo show. I think it's such a great opportunity to let people know exactly what you want them to know about you and your project. Starting out, that was important to me. You want to be seen in the clearest possible light. I'm developing a band show as well, but I think I have to make it clear that this is *my* project. I want them to know that this is mine, this is *my* show, this is who I am, this is my voice, this is me.

You've spoken very openly about what it means to be gay and black. How important is it that your work addresses identity issues in a direct way?

It is something I feel strongly about, but also I've been trying to be careful about finding out who I am based on people's reactions to me. I don't want to give other people the power and control of the perspective that I'm presenting. So that's really what I'm focusing on right now—what is my perspective, and how can it not be based on someone else's gaze? Generally I think that we focus on really small things sometimes because we're all gonna die, sooner rather than later. Especially now with the state of the world, war and climate change, things like that. It's wild that those things aren't always at the forefront of anyone's work or what they want to say. It's like there's an asteroid coming and everyone still just wants to talk about the way other people look. It's insane to me. So I try to talk about these big things without being pedantic. It's a very difficult question. How do you generally explore these questions of fear without writing a lecture? You have to move people emotionally.

Do you find that people have a hard time knowing how to describe what you do? Or how to classify it?

Yeah, but I do too, sometimes. I have a hard time fitting what I do into the words that people use for things. I know what I'm doing, but I don't know that I want to give people my words for it. I'm really interested in seeing how other people see it. Still, when I'm talking about other people having control of the narrative, it's a tricky thing. I want to present myself clearly, but I don't want to tell other people how they should feel about my art.

For musicians and dancers and visual artists, learning how to talk about your work—how to articulate your intentions with words—can be hard, though ultimately a very valuable skill.

There's so much journalism about music, there's such a language around it. I know what I'm doing, what I'm going for. I sort of know how other people would describe it, but still... it's so complicated. Trying to start my career, I never really understood how much of this wouldn't be about the music. I find myself asking "who am I?" all the time. That's really scary. First off, you don't know. I don't think anyone actually knows. Everyone sort of feels like they have a sense, but who are you really? Oh, and "give me two sentences describing the actual work. Sum it all up." That seems to be what is required of you. By the time I finish something, I usually have a pretty good sense of what it is trying to be. I think it takes me so long to finish a song because I have to examine it from so many different angles. So by the time I'm finished, I have a pretty good idea of what I want to say about it.

So much of the struggle for young artists involves getting people's attention. You are entering such a crowded playing field, it's hard to know how to stand out. Have you struggled with that?

It depends on what kind of attention you want. You can scream at the top of your lungs, but that can only get you so far. For me it was definitely a slow-build, organic thing. And that goes back to who you are. Why do people like you? What is it about your work that's compelling?

Everyone wants to have that perfect moon shot where they just have a YouTube that goes viral and suddenly your career is blasting into space, but I think in reality it really is about community. We're all connected to so many people organically and who amongst those people that you're connected to do you think this is for? Are you brave enough to show them? Maybe you shouldn't be thinking about making work for some imagined audience that exists somewhere out there in the world, maybe you should think about making work for the community you are already a part of, for the people that know you.

That's a hard thing to explain to people, especially when you're first starting out. It's not about networking and it's not about some magical big break. It's almost always about just being a part of a creative community, which is something you have to build over time.

Not only that, but people often have these weirdly irrational goals—they aim for things that don't exist. It's like doing calculus. It's like, how do you get to the moon? If your goal is just to get on Pitchfork, that's not necessarily a creative path for success. Also, why is that the goal? Is that why you make things?

You really do just have to find your people, but even that can only take you so far. It's so easy to get distracted by worrying and overthinking about who you think you are and who you think you are trying to be. It's hard, that cycle of trial and error, the self-reflection, the constant vulnerability with people. It takes some getting used to. If anything, I've gotten good at dealing with rejection. You don't take it personally, you just move on. If this person doesn't appreciate what you are doing, it's just not meant for them. It's meant for someone else's ears. Ultimately, we have a certain limited amount of heartbeats and footsteps. We have to keep going wherever they tell us to.

That's the great thing about New York City, though. There are always other rooms, other audiences, other places to meet people and try out new things.

I love that. We always move here anticipating somebody else's New York. You kind of take the steps towards making this somewhere you want to be. You find your own thing. I moved here having read *Just Kids*, but I was very cognizant of the fact that I'm not going to find my life partner sleeping in Central Park. It's ridiculous. I didn't come here for somebody else's version of New York. I came here to make my own version of it.

And as a struggling artist in the city, how did you survive?

I worked in restaurants. It's no great mystery. I've been doing it since high school, actually. I was always trying to keep up with the kids that I grew up around, whose parents could buy them stuff. I had to buy that stuff for myself. That's just how you survive. You work. You do weird gigs. I used to work at a gym and then I started babysitting somebody's kids who I met at the gym. At one point I was like, why do I have four jobs? Unless someone just falls out of the sky and decides to give you tons of money, you have to work in order to make work. And the people who don't have to work usually have rich parents.

Do you have a practice space? Or a place where you can work on music?

I have a practice space. I'm there a lot lately. It's nice. I do some recording from home, but it's really nice to get a different perspective, especially if you want to play loudly, without headphones. I have different rituals regarding how I approach a problem. I see songwriting as problem solving and there are always different problems to be solved. Working in a new space can be one way. Performing things live is another way. I see myself as a tinkerer and a songwriter, and that can actually come out in a performance. I write using both the bass and regular guitar, but I try to mix things up. Right now I'm thinking about the word "joy"—feeling joy—and trying to really unpack what that means. I guess there are two approaches I typically have. There's one, when I'm just practicing, and that forms a song. Then there's the second one where I listen back to these things and the production starts from there.

It's cool to hear you talk about exploring joy. People have such a hard time articulating joy. It's much more fashionable—and easier, maybe—to articulate despair.

For me, feeling joy is hard. It's very very new for me. It's more like elation. It's almost spiritual. And those things deserve to get taken seriously. "This is a great day in the park" isn't really compelling unless you talk about how much work it took to get there. Just be able to exist in this moment calmly and still appreciate it for what it is—that's really difficult and it takes a lot of concentration. It actually takes vulnerability to admit that maybe things aren't so bad.

So much of our work is always gonna be about struggle, but I've come to the other side of that. I feel just as much responsibility to show that the black, queer kid can feel joy. It could be about good art, feeling the adrenaline of doing something new, and being brave. Yes, gay people do that. It's fine. Also, I think a real advantage to being, say, a queer black person is that, despite the obvious hardships, a real advantage is you have to do this investigation, some soul searching, some research just to be alive, just to not die. It makes you a more interesting person.

Do you feel a certain pressure to make an album now?

I'm just trying to make songs and make lots of things. It's spreading to the edges of foreign genres. It's trying to cast a wide net. That's exciting, that feeling of discovery. I'm sure there's an album in there, though. I like to say I'm *not* working on an album, and just waiting to surprise myself by doing it. Surprising yourself is very hard to do, so you've got to embrace it and appreciate it when it happens.

Fusilier recommends:

A library card is great. I've been going to the library a lot. It's great to encounter all these little bubbles of people, all these kids that do research in the library. It's just great to be around. The main branch in Brooklyn is so beautiful. So if you're curious about something, go to a library. Don't just google. If there is something you want to know about, chances are there is a 1,000-page book just waiting for you to find it.

I also recommend embracing one's childhood as a source of inspiration. I've been looking into a lot of old drawings that I used to do, looking at old pictures for inspiration and just trying to examine old memories. Things like how I had an out-of-body experience when I was six. I feel like a lot of us just run away from investigating our spirituality, which is something we need to salvage.

I'm really big into doing research, and trying to understand your own history. In school we sometimes only learn about the surface of history. Going back and reading people like Ida B. Wells, people that you have only really heard about in passing. These people had fascinating, important lives. They still have advice to give you.

Name

Fusilier

Vocation

Musician

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Photo: Justin French