On finding joy in what you do

Musician Haley Dahl (Sloppy Jane) discusses collaborating when you have a complete vision, finding new ways to strategize in a fixed industry, and understanding that the best part of what you do is what you do.

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3230 words.

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You do Sloppy Jane with a lot of people. Do you see it as a collaboration? Do you allow space for input?

I definitely bring in an entire vision. But I also rely on people that can carry it out or add things I can't. For instance, I write a lot of stuff for harp, but that's actually a very difficult instrument to compose for, so even though I can write something for it, usually once I write a part, I'll sit down with our harp player Abby and ask, "In what ways am I not utilizing the instrument?" There are places where it's good to sit and talk through with people who are the masters in their instrument and ask, "How could it be better than what I wrote? Is there anything texturally that is cool that you can do that I don't know that you can do?"

I think anything that involves a lot of people is collaborative by nature because you have a lot of people in the room and ideas spring up. But also I think, with people who are in rock band settings or smaller bands, it's a little bit easier to have a full democracy. If I was just like, "Hey, everyone, what's an idea?, it would be too many voices at once.

Do you think you can perform with fewer people—or do you think having that many people is necessary?

I think that it's necessary. I've gone back and forth, where I'm like maybe I do a scaled back version. When we went to go play Pitchfork in Europe, we were only allowed to have a four piece [band] because of COVID. I just don't like it. It's not that it can't be done. Musically anything can be done. I can go breathe one breath into the microphone and be like, "That's the show." Some people would like it and some people would like it better than what I do now. But I like that [what we do now is] something else people aren't used to seeing. When we play as a rock band, the highest compliment I ever get is somebody coming up to me afterwards and being like, "Wow, that was really great. It reminds me of David Bowie."

I like the big band. You can just push it further. Rock bands specifically—it's just done to death as a format. There's not that much. It can't be brought to places that it hasn't been already. I've done a few solo shows in my life and it's just not very fun for me to do. It's so fun to have everyone there.

There are a ton of people involved in the band. How does it all work financially?

It doesn't. Touring is such a struggle even if you're a trio and you get a support fee, then you're like, "Oh, I can only do it as a solo act." That just happens to people all the time. It's been interesting, because recently, I feel like we have exited DIY and so we're needing to start over in figuring out the new system. Where now there is some money, so it needs to be enough money for everything. Before, it's not something I'm proud of, but no one

got paid for a really long time. Everyone just did it for fun and everyone came along. I didn't get paid either. I wasn't paying myself and not paying other people, there was no money. All the money went in the gas tank. We owned our touring vehicle, we got an airport shuttle bus where the sides and bottom were falling off and rotting. It cost $2,000. That was how we traveled. Now that bus is dead.

I'm in a new space of needing to figure out how to make it work financially. Because now everyone does get paid and we're renting vehicles and it's horrifying. The one thing we have going for us is that we're good at planning, and I think that most of the music industry's financial problems could be solved with just a little more organization, and that's something that I hope to contribute.

We've talked about the fact that Sloppy Jane involves a small village of people. You also recorded the last record, *Madison*, in a cave. That's a pretty big, specific move. Do you need to record in those kinds of spaces, or are you happy to do a studio at this point?

I said for a really long time after we recorded *Madison* that I wanted the next thing to be normal. But the longer I spend doing anything, the more that doesn't really feel true. So much time and money goes into it and there's no promised success in anything and there's no promised joy in success. All you really have is that making something is fun. That's how I build what I do. I feel like that gets lost a lot. I think about what would make me happy to be doing and then that's what I do. I still want to explore weird, different, fun ways of recording in places I think are special. Really, if you don't enjoy what you're doing, you're not going to last. It dries up.

Fun, or joy, is definitely essential, because success takes a long time. People often wait for that one thing to break them, and it just never comes. You get there by staying in it…in this industry, you'll last longer if you can manage to keep pushing the boulder up the hill.

There's things that are relieving about getting press or getting accolades or getting likes on the internet. It makes me feel a sense of relief and then I'm like, "Okay, well that means that maybe it'll be easier to get resources for the next thing I do," or something. But reading about yourself online, it doesn't feel good. It doesn't feel like anything. Even the best thing in the world doesn't feel like anything.

So many people build it up as being the goal of what they're doing. They're like, "I need to do it this way so that I get all of those articles written about me." Then you get the articles written about you and it just doesn't feel good. Then people are just miserable.

It's good to temper your expectations to understand that the best part of *what you're doing* is what you're doing. That needs to be enough without anything else. It doesn't mean not having goals outside of that, but that's the point.

My zine got written up in *Alternative Press* when I was a teenager and I was like, "All right, here it goes. This thing's going to be huge." Of course, nothing really changed. Someone will get a good score on Pitchfork or a *New York Times* feature; those things are cool and they help, but then they're suddenly gone again and you're like, "Here I am, still doing my thing." You 100% have to have joy in the work itself. Accolades accrue, and those things do all add up and help, but it takes a long time.

It's different than it used to be. It used to be there was one TV and if you were on it, everyone saw it. It now has to be so much more. You couldn't do the PR stunts of the days of yore; it wouldn't work. No one would ever hear of it. I watched the Shep Gordon documentary a while ago, about Alice Cooper's manager. They talk about all the crazy stunts he did to get Alice Cooper famous and how they stopped all the traffic in Times Square by driving a big semi truck and they drove it into the center of Times Square. It had a big billboard of Alice Cooper naked, holding a snake. That broke him. I'm like if I did a hundred of that in one day, it wouldn't do anything.

All this stuff is decided by randomness, too. It's hard because I'm somebody who really likes to do things. The idea of doing that kind of Shep Gordony thing is attractive to me. It sounds fun. It definitely sounds more fun than making a TikTok. I wish it would work. But that's not what works anymore.

Something I've noticed about the music industry is that basically everyone has the same strategy. You talk to a label or a publicist, or whatever, and most folks default to the same grid. It's not really strategy, in many cases, it's habit.

I completely agree with that. I'm a big strategizer myself. I feel like I identify as that. I've felt frustrated. Everyone is not as Machiavellian as I would like them to be. You hear about that. Everyone's like, "You would hate it." You would hate to work in the music industry because everyone's trying to change you and manipulate you for some greater purpose. I go in and I'm like, "Tell me what to change." And everyone's like, "We just want you to do what you want and also here's the exact same plan as everything else." It's not a bad thing or something, but I just think it's interesting. I wish that people were thinking more deeply about ways to push things forward.

It comes back to actually enjoying the thing you do because you're the one that has to keep pushing it.

You have some real longing, you want to do it. It's something that you need to check yourself about constantly and that has a lot to do with self defining and resisting the concept of self defining.

I'm having that a little bit right now with the band where I'm like, "Am I enjoying every aspect of this? Maybe I should restructure a little bit…" You get into a silo with doing live band stuff and it starts to be well, I'm spending a lot of money and time on this but is this what I want to be spending my money and time on.

How do you avoid burning out, when you're the one that's overseeing the project and making decisions and figuring things out? How do you keep from not hating it?

A lot of it has to do, at this point, with really trying to take care of myself the best I can. I always get enough sleep and I always get enough food and I eat the food that I'm supposed to eat. I'm not satisfied until work is done. I just try to be good about separating out my time. I know when I'm doing live band stuff, I'm not going to be working on anything else. And I'm not trying to make myself do that. I'm not going home and writing music during band practice time because I'm like, "No, I'm just going to go home and sit."

Switching back to a flip phone has been really helpful. A lot more open brain time. When I was doing the band before the pandemic, the whole time I had never had a smartphone until 2019, late 2019. I never really fully burnt out on anything and I always just liked working all the time. I switched to getting an iPhone and in November when we started doing band stuff again, I was way pissed way faster. I couldn't really figure out why. I just felt like I had no bandwidth for anything and I was freaking out and stressed and very unhappy. Then in early January, I switched back phones and it has fixed most of it.

You were saying before how you don't always necessarily find joy. Someone might not find joy in their success. For you, what is success with your project?

All the reasons that I want success are just so that I can do what I like better. That's always what's driving me. I just want total freedom. A big goal of mine is to buy a big piece of land in the desert and build insane structures and recording studios and to live there. My goal is to be permanently immersed in creative work.

The way that I want it would be in having so much freedom financially. That's just always what's pushing me, is that I want the shows to be as good as they can be, for the projects to be as big as they can be and as fun as they can be. That's just all my badge for being a maximalist.

Nothing makes me grumpier than doing the half version of something I like. I don't get the same satisfaction out of making it. When people tell me that [half-versions] are good afterwards and I'm like, "I don't trust you. That's not what I even wanted to make."

As I go on talking to people, I think having a creative block is not really a thing. Because you can have a block where you don't have an idea there. It's less of a block, it's more like you take—not even a detour—you just change directions briefly. Then you can come back and can be like all right, cool, now I can work again.

I would refer to the practice of changing the seats. Which I mean both figuratively in the larger sense of if you can't work on one thing, go try doing something else. But also the literal action of sometimes I feel really stuck on something I'm working on and if I actually just go sit on the other side of the room, then all of a sudden I'm like "And now I'm working over here instead."

I think it's very easy to say "I need to be getting exactly this, exactly right, exactly now." The first thing that I ask myself when I feel stuck and tense in working on something, is "When was the last time you moved?" Try a different chair.

It's often just about changing your point of view.

When you work on demos, a universal thing that's talked about is you get to a point where all you're doing is just listening to the same thing that you did over and over again and you're not adding anything. You're just spiraling. I've gotten better at, over time, at understanding when I've reached my stopping point. Where I'm like okay, I did something I like, now I'm going to get up and go do something else. Because there's nothing more here right now.

How do you know when something's done?

I think that nothing is ever done. So you're just deciding when the process becomes public. One of the songs on *Madison* is a song that I wrote when I was in high school. There were parts of it that I liked, but I moved away from it stylistically and I tried to rewrite it many times. Where I'm like, "I know that I like parts of that song." Then every time I had a new wave of knowledge, I would return to it and be like, "Maybe now. Maybe now it's something that I can make what I want." It did become "done" and it's now released on that record as well. It's an EP from when I was in high school. But now I play with the live band, and we're still changing things about it. It's never done and that can calm you down a little bit—where it's like, you're just assigning when the moment is that you're sharing it.

We were talking about success before. Do you ever feel failure?

I don't know. I mean I guess I feel a lot of dissatisfaction. I'm trying to not feel negatively about everything. But it's also partially my job as the person who's always trying to make things better and trying to make success happen, to not be totally satisfied. And to be a little bit frustrated so I keep it pushing forward. But that also makes it hard to celebrate anything. I haven't quite won the fight for that balance again. That's something I struggle with. But I just don't think that failure is really possible if what you're doing is something that's fun for you.

There's things that I've made where I don't like how they came out or there's times I see that some people really don't like something I did. I'm not as successful as I would like to be in my wildest teenager dreams. But none of that is exactly failure. If I found out tomorrow that I couldn't do music or something anymore because I was just such a big failure, then I do think I'm somebody who I could happily do something else in the same way. At the end of the day, at the end of my life, at the end of my career, whatever….A lack of success will never be because I didn't push something as far as I could.

Haley Dahl Recommends:

flip phones: i know it really feels like you need smart technology to be alive in 2022, but it's just not true. there are inconveniences to having a flip phone, but they're a pretty small price to pay for a clear head. it's not a horrible thing to walk a few blocks in the wrong direction or to not be able to listen to the exact song you want to hear at the exact time you want to hear it- getting a little lost is an opportunity for discovery, and silence gives you space to think and listen. if you feel like you don't have any ideas it might be because your brain doesn't have any space to come up with them.

abstinence: this doesn't have to be about sex, but it can be. i think it's good to abstain from the things you define yourself by. who you are is so much more than what you consume and it can be nice to remember that. you dont have to be the "kind of person" who does anything in order to be you.

the film "the 5000 fingers of dr.t": this is my favorite movie of all time. the only live action thing dr.suess ever wrote and directed. truly unhinged musical from the 50's about an evil piano teacher who makes a concentration camp for little boys where they have to play piano all day every day forever. there's no other movie, to me personally.

wanting something: experiment with letting yourself want things without trying to have them. wanting is a state all of its own and we learn a lot about ourselves in it and often waste the experience by making it about having something.

monogamy/monochrome: i'm a big fan of only wanting one thing, only wearing one thing, only eating one thing, only existing for one purpose. it feels like a hilarious rebellion against a world where anyone can have anything all the time. if you exist in accordance to only wanting one thing, it's easy to be decisive, and being decisive is kind of a super power. the outfit is always blue, the answer is always yes, the eyes are at the end of the bend, and the body follows.

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Vocation
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