On creating a sustainable practice

Musician Jen Cloher on the value of growing older in indie rock, and not relying on anyone else to make and release your work.

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As told to Jessica Hopper, 2460 words.

Tags: Music, Independence, Money, Success, Failure.

When did you first realize you were a person that needed to make things?

I guess it was around the time that I joined a drama class, so it was when I was in school. I think that's when I got the bug like, "This could be something I could do with my life."

How did you make the jump from that to playing music?

Well, I actually went and trained as an actor. I went to NIDA, the National Institute of Dramatic Art in Sydney, which is quite a serious school—Judy Davis, Cate Blanchett, and Mel Gibson all went through NIDA. It was like joining a really well-funded professional theater company for three years. I wore great costumes and got to work with the best directors in Australia—a pretty privileged place to find yourself. But I hated it.

I bought a guitar, and I started writing songs—that was my act of rebellion because I hated it so much. I graduated from NIDA, and I just started writing songs all the time in my bedroom. I would've been 19, 20, 21. Music became the thing that I was obsessed with. It wasn't really until much later, around 27, that I had the confidence to get up and start playing shows and actually performing songs that I had written, and it took a good five years of just doing it at home.

And then even once you did start playing, how long was it until you were making records and finding a place in the music scene?

Again, kind of late. I moved from Sydney to Melbourne at 28, and I put together my first band. I was in my early 30s when I put my first album out, which is pretty late for music. Most people are putting records out in their early 20s, but I was just learning how to play guitar then.

What did it take to get there and start making music?

Lots of terrible jobs. I spent time as a traveling saleswoman.

What did you sell?

I sold pens that change color—magic pens—and I sold massage machines, and I was traveling on the road selling them in Australia.

Were you any good?

Oh, I was great. I had a little Madonna headset.

What's the secret to being a good salesperson? How has that translated into performing now?

Well, I just use my performance skills. I was a trained actor, so I just used that way of drawing people into the story of the product. You'd have to give demos all day at camping shows, and go into rural Australia to these terrifying places and sell things. The great thing about the job and the reason why I did it was you could just do a couple of weekends and make enough money for a month. I could actually slay it, like go away and do a weekend show and make thousands of dollars, and then go and dedicate myself to writing or recording or whatever.

I got to live a true artistic existence of not really knowing if anything was ever gonna happen. I had come from a performance background and I trained at a good school and I had an idea of the standard—I had an idea of how good you need to be at something in the world for anyone to give a shit. So, I think that's why it took time. It took me time to put myself out there because I wanted to do it properly.

What was your sense of where you needed to be with it before you could start playing shows?

My whole process has always come from a place of just checking in and going, "Would I listen to this? Would I read this? Would I relate to this?"I used to make the band rehearse sometimes for 12 hours until they got good enough because I didn't want to go out onto a stage and have some average band. The live performance has always been a huge part of the reason why I do it. I love it.

Some people's practice is "first thought-best thought," but not everyone can afford to just shit something out unpolished. The stakes are higher.

People who are like, "Oh, yeah. It's just punk rock. I'm just out there doing whatever. Don't rehearse too much. That's lame. That's not cool." It's like, no, fuck you. It's a craft. Performances are craft. There were high stakes. I was getting older. As a woman, it does weigh on you. I wanted to make sure that the first body of work that I released into the world was as good as I could make it, and it paid off. It was nominated for an ARIA for Best Female Artist, which is like the Grammys in Australia, which was amazing 'cause we made it from a grant. It went out on a mega indie label, and by the time the album was out, we were a really good live band and the reviews would come back like, "This band is amazing live." If I was gonna do it I wanted to do it properly. If I'd been ten years younger, I probably wouldn't have given a shit.

How has being older in indie rock—a space that doesn't really have a historical tradition of being a space where women *can* age—how has that impacted your values as an activist-artist?

I have been releasing records now for about 12, maybe 14 years—something like that—and this most recent album is my fourth album. I've had a lot of failures. My first album went really well. So I put out the second album. It was a country folk album about my mother's Alzheimer's disease, which didn't float with the [Australian national radio] youth audience. They kind of overlooked that one, even though I went out and did all the same things that I did on the first album. On the first album, because [radio was] playing my songs, we'd turn up in Brisbane and there'd be a sold out room, 700 people, and we're like, "Oh, sweet. This is great. This is how it is."

With the second record, no one knew we'd put it out. Half the people came [out], but I was still spending the same amount of money to tour. Paying for flights, the band, sound engineers, lighting engineers, marketing, promotion, publicists, on and on it goes as an independent artist without a record label, and I went into debt. It made me reassess my whole approach to music and come out of denial. Before I was like, "Oh, I just make music and it's a bit of a hobby," but no. If you're gonna make people pay to buy your album and pay to come and see your shows, that's actually called a business. I had to wrap my head around the fact that I was running a business and that I needed to treat it as such.

After that record, I let go of the band and took some time off. I toured solo, and made some money this time. I opened a bank account that was just for my music and just changed my

whole approach around music not needing to give me anything. Basically, I have to feed, clothe, and house myself, and that's been the approach that I've had for the last eight years. If I can continue to tour and record and pay the people who are doing it with me, and that's all that music does, great. But I don't pay myself anything for my music, so I have to go and teach or run workshops or do all sorts of other stuff to pay the rent, which is, again, not something that a lot of artists talk about.

I run workshops called "I Manage My Music." I've been running them for the last eight years, and they're quite an important part of the story. The workshops are all around creating a sustainable music practice in a massive country with a tiny population, which is virtually impossible, and just letting people know that it's impossible. So, let go of the dream. Stop deluding yourself. This is the reality. You live in this country. You're miles away from the rest of the world. It's so expensive to tour anywhere outside of Australia. It's so expensive to tour inside of Australia.

At least if you are armed with that knowledge, then you're just getting out of that bullshit fantasy world that like, "Someone's gonna discover me, and then I'm gonna become famous." It's like, "No. No one cares. No one is looking for you. Let go of your fantasy." That's the stuff that I tell people. There's no one waiting to discover your music. Everyone is too busy clearing their inbox and doing their own social media posts… which I wish someone had told me. So, I just tell people what I wish someone had told me. But at the same time, it's very empowering because I'm like, "But you can do it on your own terms."

I invite independent artists and people like myself, music industry people, to come in and talk, so it's not just me rabbiting on. But from that came the whole philosophy behind Milk Records, which is the label Courtney started in 2012, and then I just brought everything that I had been learning at the workshops into the label. I was like, "Okay. The label can't go into debt. We don't borrow money. If we wanna do anything, we have to raise the funds." It'a very Discord [Records] in that sense of like, DIY.

How, as a practice, has sustainability reconciled itself in your life as an artist?

It's empowering when you no longer have to rely on anyone else to make art and to release art, so that's really been my whole thing. Obviously, I want to rely on my band and my friends, but not having to go and ask mom and dad for money or ask the bank. I just wanted to clear that up, so that I knew I was making it on my own terms.

That's what sustainability is about. It's about not using resources that are not yours, and not spending money that is not yours to spend. Not going in debt to the man, and from that, whatever you build and whatever success you have you know is yours. You own that accomplishment, and that's very esteem building. I think a lot of artists have really low self esteem around business and around sustainability because their whole life has been about being a loser. You're the black sheep. You're the one that always needs money.

Or you're ashamed to ask for the 12 bucks for the thing that maybe cost you 10 bucks to make.

Yeah. And the dream that the fucking world has created, which is some bullshit idea of commerce, that is crushing. It is enforced on you from the minute you come out of the womb. Like, "Artistry, you'll never make it. You'll need to do something else. Have you got a backup?" That's all you're told. I believed it for a long time. I think most of us do, and then I think my whole DIY, sustainable thing was like, "No, fuck that. I'm not buying that story. I'm going to do it on my own terms."

So the whole thing around Milk!—and I think why it's been so fulfilling for both myself, for Courtney, and for all of the bands that are on the label—was that all of us have this sense of ownership. The label is everyone's. No one's sitting back, skimming—everything goes back into the label. We do fundraisers if we need some money. It's very transparent. I'll send breakdowns of everything that we make. There's nothing secretive. If people wanna know stuff, then here it is. The books are open.

I think all of that stuff was a direct reaction to [when] I went into debt around my music. I lost that band. I lost that band's respect because I didn't have any clarity, and then with this band, which I've made two albums with, I've really tried to practice the way I communicate and do everything in a really different way.

All of that also means that when I walk out onto a stage and I'm performing and releasing music, I feel good about it. There's nothing in the way. I now just feel very clear. There's no, "Oh, am I doing this right?" Or, "Should I be doing that?" Or, "Am I standing right?" And I think that's a part of getting older, and it's also like if you choose to be a person who is awake and aware and in touch with your emotions and willing to look at your part and take stock of the way you are in the world, living consciously, then you get that reward. You get the reward of those things becoming more clear and trusting that intuition because there is that clarity now, which is cool.

I think that's the cool thing about getting older. It's not just about age, because there's plenty of older people who are full of shit and just remain big babies. But I also think there are plenty of people who do the work, and if you do the work, you get the rewards. That's a big part of the story as well.

Jen Cloher recommends:

Wentworth - Australian women's prison drama on the FOXTEL network now in its sixth season. It's a follow up to the legendary (and possibly first ever women's prison drama) that ran for decades in the '70s and '80s called *Prisoner*. *Wentworth* stars some of the best actors in our country and provides roles that are complex and multi-layered (not just someone's wife or Mom handbag roles).

Pema Chödrön - have loved what this Buddhist Nun has given and continues to give through her written and spoken word. At the moment I'm listening to *Don't Bite The Hook* on Audible. It's all about learning how to channel your anger in a world full of angry people!

Small Spells Tarot - I'm coming across as super new age I realize, but how good is Tarot? It never fails to be bang-on especially when you're going through some heavy life shit. I really love this woman, her cards are simple and beautiful and she gives super heartfelt and wise reading via her Instagram handle.

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