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As told to Emma Bowers, 2898 words.

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On removing pressure from your process

Songwriter and artist Karly Hartzman (Wednesday) discusses caring about what you put into the world, having multiple creative outlets, learning to make things anywhere, and not getting caught up in grind culture.

You've been touring so much in the last year, I'm curious what returning home and "landing" back in your life looks like for you.

Because Jake (Hartzman's partner and Wednesday's lead guitarist) and I are always on tour together, our house is completely empty for the time that we're gone. We usually have other people or bands stay at our house, so everything just feels a little off and there's always something smelling up the place, and everything's covered in a little bit of dust. I mostly have to clean my entire house for the first few days that I'm home, which is pretty exhausting, and then I try to relax. When you're on a schedule that's so crazy for months, it can be hard to settle into the change of pace. This time I started churning out handmade Wednesday shirts as soon as I got home just because I needed something to occupy my time.

I got a massage the other day to force some self-care, but up until a few days ago I was really still doing things every moment of the day just because I needed to come down off of that busy 24 hours a day thing. I often have to do things that force relaxation, like video games. I should probably get a new farming game or something—a fictional life that's relaxing, because otherwise I'm just going to be a productivity hound. I've done a little bit of writing since I've been home, and am starting to be able to relax into that state, but it takes a while to get back to my "home for months brain."

Do you tend to sit down to write and try to conjure an idea, or do the ideas come to you when you're out and about and you have to sit down to catch them?

The ideal thing I imagine is a writer who is so in touch with what they like to write about in their process so that they can do it anywhere. My preferred writing spot is in public with some people watching to inspire me, which is easier at home (in North Carolina) because I'm more inspired by people where I live. I love writing in the lobby at the mall. There's a Starbucks, so I can have a coffee and sit and have a reason to be there, but also eavesdrop and look at people.

The way Jake and I both write is something we learned from David Berman, where you just sit down and write 20 lines. You're not sitting down to write a song, you're just writing something. You can take a week's or even a few day's worth of it and put it together, and you can usually get something really good out of it. It takes the pressure off the process of writing a song, and that's been transformative for me.

I feel like going in and out of the writing process over time is very natural as long as you get back to it eventually. I'll go months without writing anything sometimes, and what makes the process easier is strengthening the reflex in your brain that's able to say, "It's okay that you did that."

There's so much talk about efficiency around all kinds of work, creative and otherwise. Certainly you can optimize certain parts of life, but it's dangerous to think that we can apply that to everything. There's something to be said for keeping the creative muscle strong and having a regular creative practice, but trying to force yourself to be productive and thinking that if you're not prolific, you're not really an artist—it's so harmful.

Well, the thing with music is people call me prolific, but music just takes so long to put out. If you're able to record once a year and over the course of the year you sit down to write 12 times, that's an album. That's not prolific, that's once a month, and I'm doing more than that luckily. The process of putting enough work out to be called prolific actually takes so much work and time, but the actual writing of it is not that. I'm glad I don't live somewhere where the grind culture is more of a norm. I feel like that's half of the battle, having the right reasons for writing other than just, "oh, I should be doing this."

I think too, the term prolific can only be assigned either posthumously-like when people are looking through the backlogs and find that, say, Arthur Russell had a million unreleased tapes-but in terms of modern music discourse, people can only be dubbed "prolific" once they have the resources to record as much as they want to and have the machine behind them to get that work out in a timely manner.

I never thought about it like that. That's so true. Unless you're doing home recordings.

Yeah, which totally works, but I feel that those releases don't often make it to the space where discourse is happening.

It's funny because you literally can't release things as often as you make them because people's attention spans will get desensitized to you. I've realized that's why I fell off of Big Thief, because they just released so much back to back and I was like, "I can't keep up. I haven't had time to experience that last album." I needed more time to sit with it. That's actually made me really wary of releasing work too quickly, because you need time to settle in with an artist before you're ready for more.

I was able to stay up to date with Big Thief because they already existed in my world in a such a way that when their last record came out, I could dedicate that next month of my life to listening to it. That recognition and relationship already existed for me. There's a lot of music that I really want to listen to, but unless I know that I'm going on a 30-minute drive or going to spend an hour walking somewhere, I can't hang out with that record in the way that I want to. I'm also a purist-if it's something I know I'm excited about, I want to listen to the whole record twice at least.

Yesterday I was driving to my parents' house and I listened to some interviews instead of listening to new music because I love to dime out the stereo when I'm listening to something new and exciting. I couldn't do that yesterday because my cat was in the car, so I was like, "I can't really jam anything the way I need to." I think it's so cool hearing about the different ways people listen to the music that I've made. I love that there's a possibility that there are people who would set aside a walk around the neighborhood to listen my album. That's so cool, I love that.

That's what I do with Wednesday records. In terms of genre your music is on the heavier end of the spectrum for me, so I love to be in a certain mood, and I'm like, "I'm bringing out the good headphones and I'm going to hurt my ears and it's going to feel so good."

All sorts of people have been listening to the new music, and I think it's such a compliment if it is outside of people's normal genre. So much of it to me is making sure that you're writing lyrics to the best of your capability. I think that approach to lyricism is underrated. Sonically, things will always be appealing to certain people, but good lyrics are universal, and that just keeps proving itself to me. There's a lot of stuff sonically I'm really interested in right now, but if I think about it years down the line, I'm like, "I feel like I'm going to be really into this right now, and it'll be a fun thing to go back to, but it'll never connect to it in this timeless way that something with really thoughtful lyrics can." So lyrics are always just going to be a major priority for me.

You work across so many mediums, from casual drawings and illustrations, to the patchwork Wednesday merch, to collages like the one you made I Was Trying To Describe You To Someone. You've also said that you feel more like a writer than a musician sometimes. What does it feel like for you to move between those mediums?

It's really nice to have those different outlets, because music's become my career, it really takes the pressure off to be able to sew if I feel like I want to do something creative, but don't have the energy to necessarily write a song. I can sew for hours and feel creatively fulfilled without having to get into the part of my mind that is a little harder to access that it takes for writing. I think it's really important to have some other outlets across the board.

Are you ever required to work in one medium, but you really want to do something else?

That's the cool part about everything I'm into right now, I can do pretty much all of it at home. I think a lot of it's seasonal. If I'm stuck inside, I'm more likely to sew, because, like I said, I like to write out in public, and I'm less inclined to get in my car and go somewhere if it's icy cold outside.

I think driving somewhere and sitting down makes you feel a little more intentional. It's like driving to the gym, you got in your car and went somewhere, so might as well do the thing that you came here to do. Jake works at home all the time, I don't know how, but I struggle with that a little bit more. So in the wintertime, I'm more prone to visual art, but it goes all over the place.

You reference books and novels quite a bit in your writing, and have spoken about how you've been influenced by writers like Richard Brautigan, Lynda Barry, and Mary Karr. How do you like to find new music and books?

The coolest part about what I'm doing right now is people are always recommending things to me. Since I've been talking about books more often, people go "Oh, you'd probably like this." The book I just finished was given to me by the sound guy for Drive-by Truckers because we were talking about the other stuff I'm into. It's called Norwood by Charles Portis, who wrote *True Grit*, it was totally up my alley. He's from Athens, Georgia, so I think people know I'm into Southern literature, they tend to give me more recommendations like that. I like listening to and reading interviews with other creative people, they'll probably be talking about the books they like, so that's always a map to follow.

For new music, I've been finding it most recently on tour. I feel like musicians tend to make friends with other musicians, and then they just hype each other up. If that relationship is good, it's the best thing in the world. There's also people like Doug from They Are Gutting A Body Of Water, who runs a label, and literally everything that's out on his label is great. I used to really dig into older music and these days I'm doing less of that, but I would like to get back into it. Maybe I'll go back to some of the archival labels, like Light in the Attic, and find some new older music, because I've mostly been listening to friends' bands and friends of friends, but it's always so cool to seek music out a little more intentionally.

Recently you were talking in an interview about being a working musician and said something along the lines of 'I'd love to do this forever, because it feels really, really good.' Before any of the success, did you ever imagine getting to the place where you're at right now? If so, what's the relationship between what you hoped for and what it's actually been like?

I'm so thankful I've had the opportunity to make exactly what I want to make. The thing that didn't work for past bands I've been in was that I was writing so that an audience would like it. Starting with *Twin Plagues*, I've been writing exactly what I want to write, and people are into it. I haven't been thinking about the audience at all—I'm thinking, "what would feel good for me to write right now, and how do I flesh it out with my bandmates into something sonically that I love?"

If people happen to like it, that's great, but more than anything, it needs to be fulfilling for me or else I'm never going to be able to keep doing this. So the fact that I made something exactly the way I wanted to, and I'm going to be able to live off of it and have shows where people are singing the words back to me...it wouldn't feel nearly as good if I was going into it with an intention that was anything other than me trying to write exactly what I want to write. So that's been the best part of it and the most fulfilling.

I used to imagine being in a band in the car a lot. Just to make hours go by on long trips, I would just imagine my life as a musician. Honestly, my fantasy ended around the time that you would be doing an Audiotree session—that amount of fame. We've already surpassed anything I would've imagined myself doing. I didn't get into it to live off of it, but I just ended up meeting people that created a situation for me where it became possible. Luckily the reality of it has been a lot more sustainable and overall just better than the thing I dreamed of before I even knew what this industry was really like. So luckily the reality of it's better, which is cool. Hopefully it stays that way.

I've always just heard "different" when I've asked that question. That's the first time I've heard better.

That's cool. Luckily I didn't know that much about how this world works before going into it, I think that's the main point. I'm thankful for everything that comes our way, because the likelihood of it having happened where we live is so low that I didn't know anyone personally that had figured out how to live off of music until recently. So I had really nothing to go off of.

Karly Hartzman Recommends:

The writings and teachings of Mary Karr: I recently found this syllabus that was written by Mary Karr, one of my favorite writers, who taught a course at the University of Wisconsin-Madison about creativity, and a lot of it is about teaching drawing to people that have never drawn before and appreciating that that's some of the best stuff that can ever be drawn, because it's people that haven't been trained. It reinvigorated my love of being untrained, because sometimes I get really self-conscious about how little I know, but then I remember it's a great thing.

Franbow: There's a really cool video game called Franbow, it's just a creepy point and click mystery, but it's really fun and really beautiful and dark and cool.

Getting really back into something weird that you were into as a kid: I've been into dolls since I was a kid, and recently I've been really getting into doll making subculture. For our next album, I want all the art for it to revolve around weird, creepy dolls. Not in the classic way, not porcelain, but handmade, really intentional. I think we started to get into it with the "Bull Believer" cover art, but I really want to dig deeper down to it because it's so in my subconscious because I've always been into it. So maybe not doll making specifically, but what that is to me, which is just getting really back into something that you were into as a kid that was weird, and seeing the modern devotion to it that happens online.

Exercising for five minutes every morning: I've been intimidated by exercise for a really long time. I tend to develop a really unhealthy relationship with it pretty quickly. I push myself too hard, to a point where I can't even do it anymore, because I end up hurting myself. So doing something straightforward and easy for five minutes has been life-changing for me recently. That's as soon as I wake up and it feels really good.

Hot dogs: I ate five hot dogs in two days when I was in Chicago because I love Chicago dogs, and I just realized that that's going to be a food I always want, it's always good, and you can get creative with it in a way that I always forget you can. I think if you have any food that brings you joy, lean into it.

Name

Karly Hartzman

Vocation


songwriter and artist, leader of the band Wednesday


Fact

Shervin Lainez

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