

On doing it your own way



Musician Katie Dey discusses feeling confident in your creations, fully committing to your art, and making things with friends just for fun.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2001 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Collaboration](#), [Independence](#), [Money](#).

In the PR materials you've sent out around *Never Falter Hero Girl*, you say that you truly believe in yourself for the first time ever. How did you reach this point?

I just did a lot of hard work, I think. The last album I put out, *Forever Music*, I was in a situation where I really needed to put an album out for financial reasons, basically to make rent. I put the album out in a state where I was not 100% happy with it. That's sort of been the case with almost all of my albums. There's some element of not really being fully happy with it or proud of it, or just getting to a point of exhaustion, getting rid of it, and being like, "I can't deal with this anymore." This album is the first album where I've really, fully been proud of it and proud of myself for having finished it. I think that comes with time and experience, and working as hard as I can to the best of my abilities.

When you're talking about not being fully proud of the previous releases you put out, does this tie into the concept of knowing when a song is done, not really believing that a song is ever done, things like that?

Yeah. I mean, that's definitely true. I feel like that's almost a cliché at this point with musicians, that thing where the song is never done, just abandoned. I think that's true. I think, this time, it got to a point where I could see places where I could keep going and I could keep working on the song, and I didn't need to abandon it, but I chose a point where I was like, "This is just the right point for the songs." I could keep trying to refine it, but built into the idea of the album is this idea of accepting your imperfections and embracing the incompleteness and the fragmentation of yourself. It felt almost thematically appropriate for the songs to be fragmented and imperfect and leave all of those things in, but on the other hand, I do feel like I worked on these songs harder than songs I've worked on in the past. I suppose it's complicated, but I feel really proud of them.

Just to be clear on this, because it's interesting and I want to make sure I'm understanding it right, it sounds like you did, ultimately, reach a place where you were able to release the songs, but it's not like you said, "These are done." You said, "There are still some imperfections, but the whole point is the imperfections, and I can release this and be proud of it."

Yeah, or that the imperfections were adding to the song rather than taking away from the song, whereas in the past, I felt like there were imperfections that were negatively impacting the songs.

You're the third musician I've spoken to in the past two months who's brought up this concept of, sometimes, making a song too perfect can detract from it. I'm curious if you have anything more to say about that.

Well, I mean, of course, right? The most perfect that something can be is nothing. What's more perfect than absolute silence? You're already ruining something by beginning in any way. And obviously, the most human thing

is to be imperfect. That's where the magic lives.

If you want to make a song where it feels like you're in communion with another human being when you're listening to it, you have to leave imperfections in, because that's what's going to make it feel human. But there's also something very human about striving toward perfection, so when you hear something that's very, very honed and very, very perfect, that can also be another type of feeling human. It all depends.

I want to go back to what you said about, with some of your albums, it felt like you needed to release them for financial reasons. I had gone into this conversation wondering if you have a day job and how, if you do, you balance it with your music career, but now I want to ask instead, how much do you treat your music like a business?

I don't have a day job. This music is my job. I guess I'm already contradicting myself, but I do also need to release this album for financial reasons. I have been in a situation where I've had friends to help me get through it, and I will be able to pay them back, hopefully, with whatever money I get from the album. I do treat my music like a business because I'm the only person that's running this thing. I need to be financially responsible to the best of my abilities.

This is interesting to me, because we so often hear about, with streaming, artists don't really have a way to make money, and you're talking about how, with your albums, you're able to—maybe you're not making a ton of money off them, but you're able to live. Can you talk about how, in this day and age, these albums generate you money?

Previously, I had been on labels, and they had paid me advances. I had never recouped money from the labels, so I was never able to continue making income from those albums, and those were pretty modest advances. I was not really able to just live off a \$4,000 or \$6,000 advance for an album—not for very long, at least. I was either on unemployment benefits, working, or doing various things here and there.

When I started self-releasing with *Forever Music*, I decided, almost as an experiment, to see what would happen if I put the album out on Bandcamp and nowhere else, not on streaming, just to see, would people buy the album on Bandcamp if it was literally the only place that they could get it? It seems like it worked, even though everybody still tells me to put all this stuff on Spotify, and I am putting it on streaming this time with great stress and problems.

It wasn't a crazy amount [of earnings], and I've been supplementing it with... I have a Patreon that gives me a certain amount per month, and shows here and there. I'm able to scrape by very much by the skin of my teeth. Because it's taken me a little bit longer to put this album out, my housemate has been helping me with money. It's not easy, but I'm able to live somehow with just various things. The stuff that I make from Spotify is probably the smallest percentage of my monthly income for music.

Has switching from being signed to a label to self-releasing affected how you create music at all?

The reason why I moved to self-releasing was purely because my contract ran out at my record label and I didn't want to renew. When the album is done [when you're signed to a label], it will take six to eight months for anyone to hear it. I was frustrated by that and wanted to feel the immediacy that I used to feel of making a song and just immediately putting it on the internet and letting people hear it. Self-releasing changed the way that I think about music in that I had less of this dread and association of making a song with waiting, business, and promotion.

With this album, I feel able and capable of doing a little bit more of the promotional aspect myself, but it's still very limited compared to what I would have had to do on a record label. It's been less effective in some ways but more effective in others.

With *Forever Music*, I made the most [money] that I've ever made off music in my life because I didn't have to pay PR people. None of that was part of the budget for my album because I did it myself, but I didn't have the giant

email lists that PR people have. I gave journalists a very short and inadvisable amount of lead time just because I didn't want to wait to put the album out and I was still able to make more money than I ever had before. That gave me a sense of confidence and security in my own abilities, and it changes the way you make music if you feel confident and secure. Even if you feel less secure in other ways and feel more responsibilities, I think it's worth it for that sense of freedom.

I think that came through in that the new album is, I feel, a lot more free. Maybe an hour before I sent the album out, the press releases out, I was still mixing and mastering the album, and that definitely would not have happened if I was on a label. I was able to change it up until the very last second.

When you release music as Katie Dey, I'm under the impression that a very solitary, non-collaborative creative process goes into your albums. You've also done two full-length collaborative albums with Devi McCallion. How do you know when it's time to pursue solo creation versus collaboration?

It varies. Sometimes, I'll just be messing around in FL Studio and be like, "I will never be able to write a Katie Dey song to this. I'm sending this to Devi immediately." If I write a song on the guitar or the piano, starting with guitar, piano, and singing, it's most likely going to be a solo song. Sometimes, I just am hanging out with Devi and we're like, "Do you want to make a song together?" It's more of a social thing. My stuff with Devi is definitely more social music. I have to contend with the fact that I am making it with somebody else rather than just being insular and a feedback loop of my own psyche.

I'm curious what exactly you mean when you talk about hanging out with Devi, because from what I understand, she's in a time zone a full 15 hours behind you. Is it just like, you'll be just on Zoom or FaceTime or something chatting with her, and suddenly, it becomes a moment of working on music together?

She and I talk on Discord, and on my second monitor at my desk, Discord is permanently open. She can message me at any time and I will see it. We basically talk all the time, every day. I don't remember the last time that there's been a day that I haven't talked to Devi. We're just best friends, and as best friends do, sometimes you get bored or you think, "I feel creative," or, "I want to do something fun." Our way of having fun can sometimes be to make music or make songs together.

Katie Dey Recommends:

kerovee: free formant shifter and pitch correction vst by g200k. the most common question i get from people is how to i get my voice to sound like that and this thing is how. it's 32bit and only works on windows i think

yeshe coconut palm drink: this stuff apparently was running ads that were telling ppl it makes their boobs bigger and even tho that's definitely not real idk it just slaps and u can sorta decide to feel the placebo effect for fun if u want

buying old used casio keyboards: they sound dope and are fun to play with and look cool and u can fill your whole bedroom up with them if u want

"how can we bear to throw anything away": video essay by jacob geller

holding hands with your friends and feeling pure love

Name

Katie Dey

Vocation

musician

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