On going beyond your comfort zone

Musician Loraine James discusses balancing a day job with creative work, different forms of collaboration, and not taking anything for granted.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2330 words.

Tags: <u>Music</u>, <u>Collaboration</u>, <u>Creative anxiety</u>, <u>Process</u>, <u>Production</u>, <u>Day jobs</u>.

Many of your songs feature guest vocalists, but your voice is occasionally front and center. How do you know when someone else can better convey the emotion you're going for?

The way I see myself is that I'm not really a singer or lyricist. There's been times when I've tried to force lyrics and sing, and I've just given up and been like, "Oh, I don't think this is for me." But then, equally, I've had an idea for a guest vocalist, and I end up caught up with some lyrics and stuff myself, and I end up singing it myself.

I always say to people, I know I can't sing, and that's something I'm not bothered about. I just like doing it and scribbling five words down and repeating those five words. That works for me. I feel like there's a seriousness that comes in with labeling myself as a vocalist, and I'm just not.

When you have other vocalists on your tracks, how often are these collaborations entirely digital or in person? Are they sometimes a mix of both?

Reflection was all digital. It was the pandemic. _For You and I_ was all digital as well. This new one, _Gentle Confrontation_, I've done a couple of tracks in the studio with <u>George Riley</u> and <u>Contour</u>. That's been really nice, to do it in person.

I guess because I'm nervous and shy, and I get a bit stressed, I could be really quiet, so I feel like I'd be quite dead to work with in a studio setting, as opposed to not having that in-person conversation [aspect in digital collaboration]. But equally, it's been nice to come out of my comfort zone and just make stuff. For example, the Contour collaboration, I had made an idea on my own. I sent it to him, and it wasn't quite working 100% when he came to London, so we made something from scratch in a studio setting, and it was very different and was much better.

How do you overcome the challenges of feeling nervous or shy when you're collaborating in person?

It's a lot I put on myself. I feel like if I'm in a room for a long time with someone I haven't really met before and don't really know that well, even if you like each other's stuff on Instagram or whatever, it's obviously different. You might not click in person.

For me, studio spaces don't feel the most comfortable. I'm really used to working at home in comfort, my own space, and studios just feel sterile to me. I feel like I put a time limit on my head [in studios with others],

and I have to be really quick, especially if someone's writing vocals. I just feel like I can't take my time, even though I can and it's okay, but I just put this pressure that I need to make something quick, because obviously they need to write something too. It's something I'm still navigating.

With someone like George, we actually met in the studio two and a half years ago, but that's one of the rare occasions where we hit it off instantly. They're genuinely my friend in my life, not just [in] this whole music thing.

Have you felt that there are any distinct advantages or disadvantages to collaborating in person versus digitally?

The disadvantage of digital is, sometimes, the other person will feel like there's less leeway to do stuff, but every time I send something to someone, I never give a brief. I just say, "Do whatever you feel like doing." I don't like to make it rigid because I always find it's more freeing and better when collaboration comes without any limitation. Digitally, sometimes, there isn't necessarily that meeting of two minds, which you would get more if you were actually in a room with them. But then, something digital, I like because it removes the awkwardness for me.

You've released an EP or album every year from 2018 onward. Why do you release music so often? Does this reflect how quickly or how often you create music, or is it about keeping people listening, or is it some of both?

It's really not about people listening. I don't make music a lot. I do make it kind of quick. I love the serious stuff of the albums, but then, I like doing the random fun stuff, like the <u>Bandcamp thing</u>, and just playing around with *a capellas* or just being like, "Oh, I feel like making an EP today, let me just do five songs."

Even when I work on an album, I don't spend too much time going over it, and I do more than a Bandcamp thing, but I don't like everything to be so clean and so perfect, so that's probably why there's a quickness.

What draws you toward things that aren't clean and perfect?

I first heard of Bandcamp in 2011-12. I was about 15, 16, and I was listening to a lot of math rock then, and a lot of the artists definitely weren't signed back then, like Foxing and a bunch of other guys, and their stuff sounded so bad, but I loved that. They were recording in the garage, and when they all got signed the cleanness just felt a bit less emotional. But obviously that doesn't mean bad. I just have a thing for the roughness of that stuff I was listening to, there was a warmth to it.

Another musician I spoke with recently said something along the lines of, sometimes, when you make a song cleaner or more perfect, it loses some of its meaning or the emotional impact you intended for it to have. Does that sound true to you?

100%, yeah, especially if I'm doing my bad singing. I like to keep the first take, or first few takes, even if it sounds a bit pitchy. I don't use pitch correction. How my voice sounds is how my voice sounds unless I'm purposely trying to use AutoTune in a creative way, a Travis Scott way or something, instead of a medical surgery kind of thing. I just don't like that, personally.

For [*Gentle Confrontation*], I did a couple more takes. "2003," I did more takes because the importance of that song, I wanted to nail it a bit more, so I knew I could sing it better, and it just wasn't hitting. Even sometimes when I play the drums and the keyboard and I hit a wrong note or two, I'll just keep it in there.

How do you know when an album or an EP is done? What about a song?

Most EPs I've done have just been for fun, Bandcamp stuff, so I just stop when…I guess with EPs, it's easier. It's like, "Oh, EPs are usually four or five songs." I know it will end within that bracket.

In an album, it could vary. When I'm coming to an end is when I'm making new ideas and they sound really bad. For each album, I always make 30 to 35 ideas. They could range from literally a five-second loop to a two-, three-, four-minute actual song, and I mark them. There's always ones I know immediately—the first song, "Gentle Confrontation," was one I actually did during making *Reflection*, so it's in my *Reflection* album folder, but I knew it didn't fit there, so I marked it and said to myself, "I'm going to use it for whatever I felt."

[*Gentle Confrontation*] was obviously longer than all the others, and I was trying not to think about, everyone always goes for 10 songs, that's how every album has to be—10, 11 songs. I was trying to tell myself that it doesn't matter. I was worrying a bit about, it's more or less an hour, is that too long? I always just know I've made enough.

It sounds less like the length was an intentional decision and more like that's what made sense based on the ideas you came up with. Does that sound right?

Yeah. I don't have a plan of how long something is going to be, and when I was going through what songs I liked, and it was going past 12 [songs], and it was going past 14. I had 15, but then I really wanted <u>Marina Herlop</u> on it, so I'm going to make it 16.

I wanted a lot of things on it, and I didn't want to leave [them] out, because, for me, a lot of the time, if I make something in the album cycle and I really like it, I probably won't use it for something else. I wanted to do everything on this one. I had a bunch of people in my mind that I really wanted to be on it, and so, if we're making that 11-track to a 12-track, 12-track to 14, etc., then that's how it was going to be for me.

You've mostly released music under your own name, but you've also released an album as <u>Whatever the Weather</u>. Why has a second alias felt necessary for your creativity, whether just due to genre differences or something more?

It kind of came randomly. I wasn't planning on making an alias. I was approached by Ghostly [International] about doing a record, and I just didn't see Loraine James under it. I'd made some stuff that I really, really liked but just could never fit under my name, so it was like, "Okay, well, let's start something else."

It was nice to dedicate time and put a different energy into it. I really enjoyed making that album, and I even more enjoyed playing it live. I've only done it a handful of times, like five times, but it's such a different pace for me. I sit down on a chair just taking my time and it feels much slower, but I feel a lot lighter, in a weird way. It's really nice to put out a different energy and not be in the club space all the time either.

This makes me wonder what value live performance has in your creative process.

[On *Gentle Confrontation*], "Tired of Me" came from playing versions of it live for quite a few years, and "Try for Me" with Eden Samara, I reworked that after playing it live a couple of times because I thought it sounded pretty flat. It's weird with that song, because I actually prefer the live version, but I would never change it in terms of production because the live version would never translate as a recorded song and vice versa, so I like having the difference of that.

I really like taking the songs and playing them live because it's a different version of them and it definitely made me tweak some things on *Gentle Confrontation*. On "Try for Me," there's this bass bit that came from a live performance I did last year. I got the audio back from it and there was a crowd going "woo!" as well, and I used that. It was nice to fuse it together in a not 100% obvious way, so that was fun. Production and playing live play massive parts of Loraine James. They don't exist without the other.

Over the six or so years that you've been releasing music, have you had any sort of day job along the way? If so, how have you balanced that day job with your music? If not, how did you know how to make the leap from having a day job to not having one and just focusing on your music?

My first album, 2017, I did that when I was at uni. We had to do a final music project, and I didn't know what to

do, so I made an album. And when you get a music degree, you can't really do anything with a music degree, so I was doing hospitality work for a couple of years. I would only play at the one-odd show every, I don't know, six months or something, all in London. And then, I was working at a school, and that was when I got signed to Hyperdub.

I wasn't really playing much then either. Then, when *For You and I* came out, I did a few shows. I supported <u>Holly Herndon</u> on one, and Telefon Tel Aviv, which was really cool. To get to a show in Brighton, I finished work at four, and I had to take the train and then work the next day. And for international shows, you come back on a Sunday and you wake up at six to work. It was a lot.

Before the pandemic hit, I was getting stressed because I had a few dates, and I was really quite tired because of playing on the weekend and waking up early to go out to work. It did start to drain me. But even before the pandemic hit, I was planning on just taking a leap and seeing about doing this music thing full-time, seeing if it would work. And then, the pandemic hit, so I wasn't working. I survived off doing remixes, and Bandcamp Fridays. I did a bunch of Bandcamp EPs.

I still never feel settled, because I feel like, at any second no one, maybe, wants to see you play or listen to your thing. I know it can happen in a second, so I'm never comfortable, which isn't great—but I guess freelance, everyone would feel like that.

Loraine James Recommends:

<u>Morley's</u> 6 chicken wings and chips

<u>NTS Radio</u>

Bringing a Nintendo Switch on tour

Seeing friends more often

Failing at trying to learn a new language

<u>Name</u>
Loraine James

<u>Vocation</u>
musician

☐

Ivor Alice