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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2057 words.

Tags: Music, Art, Success, Process, Creative anxiety, Mental health, Collaboration, Identity.

On remembering why you do what you do

Musician Louis Carnell discusses identity, developing your own unique process, accepting the things you can't control, and finding new ways to view success.

It can often be useful to come up with a creative identity separate from your own personal identity. You've been making music as Visionist professionally for a decade. What made you decide to start using your given name to the project? You just released a song, "Fixed is the Day We've Cast Our Lot," which is a reimagining of "Cast" from your last album. It was previously instrumental; you sing on this version.

When I started using the alias Visionist, it was a time where I knew I wanted to create music that went further than I had tried before. I worked very much in genre until then. As I was exploring more music, I was becoming aware of musicians who were cross-referencing across the musical sphere. I also wanted to explore those terrains.

I've always been someone who analyzes, whether that be in creating or experiencing art, current climates or in social situations. I think that's where the Visionist alias came from because I like to study, I like to analyze, I like to feel that I'm prepared in order to anticipate a situation.

With this research and understanding, I can create a different narrative. In the early part of my career a lot of the conversations were always about creating something futuristic or something like that. As I've gotten further down my career, that whole notion of new, I don't know if I believe it in the same way I did when I was a lot younger.

I think "new" was the excitement I wanted to have for a career. But with continuous exploring I started to hear music that has done similar things I might've done myself. I think originality is still a thing, as we can choose to have varying approaches and stories. In terms of sound, the adaptation can only go so far. It's why we continue to see these cycles.

My early work as Visionist was very much influenced by my environment. Because I'm from London I began to read Simon Reynolds Hardcore Continuum essays about underground dance culture. The forming of new genres and the cycle of interest in them.

I wanted to break or disrupt that, and because of my knowledge and approach to my practice I felt I could. I got to a point where even though I was getting shows and getting a little bit of a name for myself, I very much still felt that I needed to create a reason for why I existed in the music community. I needed something that felt standalone from whatever else was happening.

I understood it was going to take me drawing from more life experiences to make this possible, but also I moved myself away from the record labels I was associated with as they were a distraction. My work became more interrogative and confessional. I started to allow a piece of Louis to be seen. Once this decision was taken, gradually I've opened up more and more, allowing an insight into my struggles with anxiety, and speaking on masculinity & race.

There are sections of the industry I've felt misunderstood by. I've found it hard to break free of the shackles of my earlier work which has led to descriptive urbanization thereafter. Whether this is conscious or unconscious bias, I cannot say. The themes that I tackle in my albums have been questioned by some, whether that is because of stereotyping, or because they find it hard to decipher the actual self

behind the alias.

This flattening of identity is something I'll always push against. However, rather than getting caught up in the fact, I will continue to be unguarded in wanting a greater connection with my audience. The decision to move forward from my alias in favor of my birth name was important in understanding where I am now and where I want to be, but also a breadth to experience freedom.

Does it feel different to write music under your name?

I made this decision during a weird time where I'm not out in the world, in the normal routine of what it means to put out an album, because of the pandemic. But I've known for some time that later in my career I would want to present under my real name. Sometimes I'm a bit spiritual so the numbers of three (albums) and 10 (years as Visionist) resonated with me. A *Call To Arms* was key in this decision as it offered a gateway that the other albums hadn't.

Yeah, it's been a weird process. The decision felt like death for a while, but the truth is the music and experiences still live, it's not gone. I'd have to pull the music from the internet, pull the experiences from people's memories. I have no control of that, and don't want to do so. I'm just trying to show a true reflection of what I understand myself to be. I know it could be considered a risk but I follow my gut a lot and have done throughout my career. Does it feel different? I'm still finding that out but I'm excited by the prospect.

Watching the new video, even though you're using your name, there's still a lot of mystery.

Maybe I just can't help that, I feel art is about asking questions and a reflection on the world as you see it. The video is about unity and ideological coexistence in consumer media platforms. It all came about from the premise of 'we operate in rented spaces.'

Mystery is why I believe so many of us become artists. We are literally walking in the dark most of the time whether that be because of our unknown abilities or what it means to have this role as a job. Constantly exploring our place within the industry and how to get that next payment. We've made that conscious decision to walk through the dark and look for the pockets of light to answer the questions we have.

That's the thing as an artist—you have to keep it interesting for yourself. Once you start caving in or thinking too much about the audience, that's when things start collapsing.

Yes. I think that's where it can start collapsing for yourself. I know musicians who have been extremely successful but hate the music they make. It's extremely difficult to be continuously comfortable when you are not attempting to make 'popular music' so I understand why there are those who compromise. I believe there's enough avenues for my work but mainly I would hate to kill creation for myself. So I take risks, maybe after a decade I can have an audience that sits parallel to my creation.

How do you view success? How do you view failure? What I'm hearing from you is that failure would be to not follow your own inspiration, to do something that you're not interested in just to do it and put it out there.

A common opinion on success is how much press you can achieve or maybe the amount of shows you do. I think people would be surprised what records have made me the most money, and when it comes to the amount of shows, well we all have our own limits. For me, success might not be the coverage or reviews you get but the fact your work has allowed you to create a one-to-one relationship and collaborate with an artist you really admire. There are many forms. I am aware of my achievements.

There's this push to get caught up in the generic explanation of success. It almost pushes you to a point where you just want to quit. You can get lost in the wind, and just be like "Oh, this record hasn't done as well. So where am I at now? Am I now for the yesterdays? But then you've lost the reason you started the project. You have to keep reminding yourself that when everything else comes into play—when you give your work to the public and everything else starts to work itself out around it—you have to remember what the purpose is. You have to ask yourself: "Is it true to me?" Failure is determined by the individual.

I see a lot of people fall into the comparison trap. Like you were saying, you're thinking, "This isn't doing as well as I wanted it to." There's also the thing that people do where they're like, "This person seems to be doing better than me." That's never useful.

It's very easy to fall into the comparison trap. I've definitely been in those moments, when it has come to my music. I couldn't determine why there are assumptions that a group of artists had the same approach to music because it sounded similar. It seems people find it tricky to separate the art from the aesthetic.

With focus on identity politics, as an artist of color you start to wonder whether you need to push this aspect of your identity to be noticed as part of the current conversation. But I don't like this othering situation. Because of actions I have taken, gateways are created for those also trying to break the glass ceiling, this has been achieved by working with certain labels or visual artists.

Comparison is a distraction from the self and all that you want to achieve creatively. "Better" is a

complex term that aligns itself to sport, where music and art is subjective. "Better" financially, "Better" in health, "Better" at marketing, "Better" at music and so on. Who even knows anymore?

Find a community is a success. Finding collaborators who you can stick with and work with for long periods of time is success. There are people whose albums barely get reviewed and they feel successful. They find some other thing, or marker, that feels successful to them. This idea of equating success with being included on a year-end list is wrong and boring—these aren't always the sure fire markers of whether or not what someone made was successful.

I find it difficult to see the difference between underground and popular culture now. I think sometimes you have to understand we have different ideas of where we want our careers to be. We have different ideas of how we want to live. You don't just achieve in one line, you achieve in many. It's quite hard to sometimes see that there's not just this one way of getting success, whether that be positive reviews or getting in an end of year list. It's nice to be acknowledged and to be continued to be acknowledged, it's never a bad thing, but it's not the end point. It's one achievement of many others. People who just create and release with no other thoughts maintain that childlike/hobbyist approach we all had at first, it's hard not to miss that.

What I realized over time is that each thing is part of an ongoing journey. The journey never ends. Everything adds to the next day. For me, success is if I can wake up, enjoy what I'm doing, and be able to pay my bills. Sticking by my morals or my ethics and making things I'm happy to make is the ultimate success. The "moment" is a bunch of moments strung together.

You can't choose your moment. You can be ready. You can prepare. If you have a clear path, you can start to pinpoint and target, but you can't actually choose the moment. You can think you're doing everything that would align to create the moment, and there are ways of getting closer to it, but the moment itself is beyond you. That's out of your control.

Louis Carnell Recommends:

Look out the window when traveling, it's important to give attention to the in-betweens.

I was once told, do not complain or worry about writers block or not being being able to achieve what you wanted in a session, as the technology owes you nothing. It has given you so much as it will again.

Learn to Swim.

There's something precious about the next email.

Continue to seek the role of the pupil.

Name
Louis Carnell

Vocation
Musician

Fact

Louis Carnell

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