



# On why you don't really need to suffer for your art

Musician Nilüfer Yanya discusses the value of working with family and friends, redefining success, and understanding the things that make you special.

## How did you start writing your own songs?

Through writing. I knew I loved songs and I always had notebooks when I was younger and wrote down ideas and lyrics and I wanted to write songs from quite young, even 10 years old. I remember trying to write songs because I really love music, but I didn't have a lot of CDs. I didn't have my own music collection because I was so shy and reserved. I was always worried that people were going to judge me. When you're younger and people are like, "Oh, what are you listening to?" or "Who's your favorite singer?" I remember thinking, "I don't want to tell you, what if you don't like them?" I was very reserved in that way. So I always worked on a lot of things in my head. Then when I started playing guitar, I started making them a bit more obvious songs. It was a process. I'm still learning.

## Do you remember how you developed your singing style?

I knew I didn't have a super high strong voice. I can sing high, but it's more like a falsetto kind of vibe. I was aware my voice has kind of deeper and lower tones. When I was growing up, I don't think I listened to a lot of female vocalists. I was listening to a lot of male vocalists and I wasn't really thinking about their voices, I just thought it sounded cool. So when I started writing, I was aware I didn't have a stereotypical good, beautiful voice. It was my own voice so I had to write for the way it worked.

## When you were younger a manager wanted to recruit you to be in a girl band but you were not interested in participating. Was this a difficult decision to make?

I did think about it because they were messaging me. They were like, "Oh we've got a proposition," and they're a management company. At the time, I didn't have a manager so I was like, "Okay, obviously I'm going to go see what they're talking about." They were like, "Oh, I can't tell you what it is over the phone so you have to come to an office." Then I came to the office and straight away I was like, "This is going to be some girl band thing, isn't it?" They were like, "Yeah, so we're starting a group and we really want you to be the singer. We're going to be like Haim, but better." I was flattered that they were asking me because I was like "Oh, someone thinks I'm good." It just wasn't for me, then I found out later that it didn't work out anyways, so I was lucky.

## You come from a family of artists who are also your close collaborators. Does that make you feel more comfortable and familiar with all the hustles and challenges of being an artist?

Yeah. I didn't plan it that way. Me and my sister always made videos together and that was quite a natural evolution from our relationship because we were making little films or doing photos. And I knew she had an interest in film and photography. So when I started doing music videos, naturally, she was the first person I asked to be involved. From then on, we've just kind of grown that relationship and kept working together.

I think a lot of the time you either start to work with one person anyways. So it just happens to be that she was there from the beginning, which is great. Then because of that, we get a lot of our other family involved in the whole process. My mom makes a lot of set design and my sister helps, my younger sister helps as well. My brother helps sometimes. Aside from that, I've got an uncle who is a producer and has a studio that I used to help out in or work in. I recorded my first demos there and I still do some recording there sometimes when I'm working on an album or some writing.

## It seems that they are supportive and provide some kind of mentorship.

Exactly. I knew that from the beginning my uncle was one of the first people to be like, "Oh, you should sing your own songs and you should do it or you'll get too scared about it when you're older." And my sister would always be like, "Yeah, you should go and do those gigs." So everyone's been very supportive and now it's just happening that we can all work together, so it makes sense.

**Your first album, *Miss Universe* was well received. Did you have any expectations on what you wanted to achieve and express with *PAINLESS*?**

I didn't really, I just hoped people would listen to it and they wouldn't hate it. Because, with second albums, everyone's like, "Oh, it's going to be different," or you're a bit worried people wouldn't like it as much. I was just quite relieved when it came out and people actually still liked my music and they didn't hate it because it is different from *Miss Universe*. I actually think it is better in a way, more refined. But I try not to read reviews because I don't really care. Because it's nice that people listen to it anyway and they gave their opinion, so that's what counts.

**With social media, it seems like everybody is a critic. Do you look at yourself online?**

Sometimes I end up doing it by accident and then I'm like, "Why did I do that?" And then I think about it all day. Everyone has an opinion, and it's interesting because once I've released the music, I've also detached from it. So even if someone hates it and leaves really harsh review I've already moved on. The ideas I'm working on now are always going to be different from the things I've done. I'm always working on the next thing, and that's why I try not to judge other people's albums too much or their music because it's like, their music is also the music they haven't made yet. Reviewing is kind of a weird process. I always think about it. If you were at school and you had a student, you wouldn't want to review someone's work too harshly because you want to keep encouraging them to keep creating.

**Is it easy for you to detach from an album after your release it?**

By the time your work comes out, you've already moved on because it's been six months, a year, or nine months. It's different when you go on stage and you have to perform the songs again. And to be honest, those reviews are harder because the crowd's feedback is immediate. When I'm playing the songs you have to reconnect with them and be there again. But as a record, I don't really go back and listen to the songs unless I have to for a reason.

**I was reading an NPR interview you did. In it, you mentioned the idea of assuming everything has to be hard when it comes to music. There's the assumption that artists need to be in some kind of pain or suffering to produce their best work, the idea of the tormented artist going through some kind of struggle or crisis and that led them to their current process.**

The whole notion that have to suffer for art... Making something isn't always easy, but making something is a great way of healing and working through things. Whenever you write something, you're working out problems in your head. So, it's not straightforward. But I think we've over-romanticized the idea that something has to be really bad before it gets good.

To be creative you need to be in a healthy, happy state. We don't expect people to do other things when they're sad or suffering. People know that they can't do their best work when they're really upset about something. Think about building a house. If you're sick, how can you build the house? It's not really possible. Or, if everyone was always sad, how would we do things? When you ask people about their process, a lot of the time they're trying to get to a good place in order to make the work. They're building their studio. Or, they found a really nice place they want to write in. Or, they've got all their band around them, and they want to write like that.

That's a lot more exciting than being like, "Oh I need to go for a break-off," "Oh, I need to have a divorce," "I can only do something when something terrible has happened." It kind of says a lot about our society more than everything else.

What do you think?

**I think that maybe this idea that artists suffer contributes to their precarization.**

Exactly. I don't think it's going to help things evolve or help society. Of course, art at the end of the day does do that. It does contribute to the world and society and people's lives and it's like, if we always keep it just reserved for something when we are reacting, and we're just being totally instinctive and hurt, then it's not giving it the space it deserves. It's rubbish to think that all artists are expected to be poor and not make any money from their work forever.

**Since art has been really present in your life because both of your parents are artists. I'm wondering if you ever thought of other career paths.**

I probably would've gone to art school if I didn't do music because love painting and drawing and making things. But for some reason I felt like with music there was a bit of a ticking time bomb and I was like if I don't do it now, I might get too worried, I might get too nervous. I think there's a lot of pressure as well. I definitely felt that pressure of being successful when you are young and I felt like I needed to focus on music otherwise it's never going to happen, which isn't true. I definitely could have taken my time to go to art school if I wanted, maybe it would've been better, but that's what I chose.

**You just mentioned that you felt the pressure of being successful while you were younger. I'm wondering if this is something that you put on yourself or was it more related to your environment.**

The pressure came from wanting to be a professional singer/songwriter. And all these artists that I was listening to were really young so I was like wow, if they're doing it now, surely, I need to do this as

well. I need to do this now before it's too late, which isn't true because I think even if I started now, it would've been fine. Now I'm seeing loads of examples of artists that I really like who are in their 30s and they are just releasing music for the first time. I kind of wish I didn't feel that pressure and I took a more chilled-out route. But I also had a lot of drive to make music and anxiety around being able to not sit and think about it too long, just to do it. Because I was also the kind of person who, if I thought about it too long, might not do it. And it definitely helped me grow a lot of confidence.

I also had lots of friends that were in bands and I wanted to do the same. I wanted to be performing and even though I didn't really performing, I wanted to release music. I was really excited about making an EP, so I just wanted to do it straight away.

**You didn't like performing when you were starting?**

I did it because I felt like I should because I knew that I needed to at some point and I was like, if I do it now then I'll feel better about it in a few weeks or in a year, I won't have to worry about doing it. But even now I still don't really love performing. It's like, "Ugh, do we have to? Do we have to go to the show? Can we just make music? Do we have to do the tour?" I really enjoy it and the way it's grown because it's got to a stage where I have a really good band. It's cool and it's nice to be able to bring that to shows and bring that to festivals, but it's not the place where I feel most comfortable. I definitely wasn't born and was not meant to be on stage. I'm a bit awkward, but it just felt necessary.

**You mentioned earlier that you felt the pressure of being successful since you started your career. After all these years, what does success looks like for you now?**

If you have an idea and you want to do it and you do it, that's successful – regardless of if it goes well or not. That you feel free enough to carry something through is a success. It means you're really going to progress, regardless. Even if it doesn't go according to plan, you can do the next idea you have or the next thing or the next. If you're not phased by the idea of success, that's successful. Not letting bad thoughts get to you, and not letting negative criticism get to you, that's success.

**What advice do you have for young artists that might share the same pressure of being in the spotlight or successful from a young age or when they are just starting out?**

I think just not rushing. It's also really good to turn off your phone and not go near it and just focus on your work and not always have to be connecting and communicating with people. I am really lucky because when I was younger I didn't have a phone for a long time so I didn't have to worry about promoting myself as I do now.

Nilüfer Yanya Recommends:

Athens (the city)

If you are in London, visit the vegan restaurant Mallow.

My friend has a really cool gallery, it's called Home, and my sister works there, actually. It's in North London. If you like art and photography and fashion, it's a really good place to go.

Bomb: It's a really nice magazine They get artists to interview other artists and there are no official interviews, it's just more like conversations.

The book "Lady Sings the Blues" by Billie Holiday.

Name

Nilüfer Yanya

Vocation

musician, singer, songwriter


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Molly Daniel

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