

On making the journey the goal of your work

Musician Paz Lenchantin discusses being fully present in the project, the importance of listening, and releasing what you make

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As told to J. Bennett, 2906 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Collaboration](#), [Focus](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Success](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#).

You sing, you play bass, violin, piano. You've made music videos. I heard you took up pottery during the pandemic. Is there a consistent attitude or spirit that you bring to all of these different disciplines?

I'm just very dedicated to the craft of music for the most part. I'm also very interested in design, and when I don't have instruments, I try to find things to create shapes because music in a sense is like a shape. It's a different kind of shape, but it is architecture to me. When I don't have an instrument, I like to look at things as design or create in a different form that still stimulates the musical artistry that is fundamentally my first kind of language, I guess you would say.

What are you striving for when you make music?

I don't look at the goal; I'm in the journey. I've made many, many records, but this new record is my real first attempt at doing something by sitting with myself and being like, "Well, who are you in music on your own?" Not like it was something too pre-thought in that way. In retrospect, I could see the intensity of what I was doing once I was in it: I didn't want anyone in my studio, and it was a lot of tipping of the hat to where I came from. All the songs, for the most part, started on the piano with the freedom of playing without thinking too much about structure and then applying the vocal after.

It was a strange kind of way of, again, architecture. Fundamentally it started with piano, but then I would remove things. Like I would play the drums to my bass, but then I would replace the drums and then replace the bass. So, a lot of things were moving parts, but the piano was always fundamentally there. Sometimes I didn't use a click, sometimes I did.

I have a Steinway in the living room, and I had a remote keypad, but I couldn't see the screen because it's in another room, so it reminded me of playing to tape because I had to do one take, perfect. I was very focused because I couldn't go back and punch in because I wasn't in front of the screen. I really liked that feeling: Your first take is always the best one. Make it happen. All the songs started with that feeling.

At first, I didn't know I was making a record. I write all the time, so I have so much music. I would kind of scroll through what I had, like, "What sounds like where I'm at right now?" Then something would strike me, like a cool piano part, and I'd work on it. Once I was six songs in, I realized I was making a record. That kind of halted any other goals, and I dedicated myself to that. And that's important because the experience of making a record for me is the moment—not dabbling at it. I have to put both feet in and close the door.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that the journey is the goal. And doing the journey without regret. And regret

to me is not caring enough or being overly distracted. Your potential artist self has to be fully in the project. And it was nice to do that. It was an emotional time for because of my breakup [with Pixies], but it goes to show me the beauty of this relationship I've had all my life with music.

As you mentioned, this is your first solo record, and you also said this is very important for you to do this by yourself. The public is probably used to seeing you in a group context...

I love collaborating. I think collaboration is a forte of mine. And knowing what your fortes are, you just want to constantly do it that way. But this was different. It wasn't the challenge of, "What can I do by myself?" It was more just sitting with myself to heal. It was not thinking too much about the self, or else you stop. Like with lyrics, for example, something that has helped me so much with lyrics is, it starts with being about something that is outside of yourself. It's not the "I feel this" or "I feel that" or "I'm going through this." It's like something that is a tree or an object or another person or a character you make up.

Or of course like a dream, when you wake up and say, "Oh my gosh, I had a dream about you." You were actually that woman or that child in the dream. So, we end up being all the characters that we are writing about, but for me, it has to start with it *not* about me for me to get to the other side. If you're surfing, you've got to get through all those crashing waves to finally get to the other side where you can actually ride a wave. And it feels like that with music—paddling out is the hardest part. You don't want to stop your process to make it not about you because in the end, it's always going to be about you. There's nothing else I can do but know myself.

What makes a good song for you? What do you need to get out of it?

What makes a good song? I have no idea. I don't think about that at all. I don't like to worry about those things. Even if it's a bad song... I like to save songs. I like bad songs. When I see a song that's about to be gone forever, it's practically in the trash, and I'm looking at that song's like, "You've come such a long way but now you're probably not going to make the record. What's wrong with you?" In this conversation, it's the underdog song. And the underdog song is going to have a death.

But I try to find what I did to it, like, "How did I force something that the song didn't want to be?" Maybe it didn't want to go to the chorus. Maybe I did the chorus twice and the song doesn't like choruses. Before putting an end to a song, I like to look at it and turn it around a little bit. But it's all fun to me.

I will say this though: as a musician who plays music in front of an audience, making a record is a completely different craft. It's something I enjoy very, very, very much. And I probably would love doing that for the rest of my life, just being in my little cave. But as a musician, the art is to play an instrument in front of another person that's listening. And without that, I don't feel like a musician.

Why not?

Because I think that's what we always did. And when I say "we," I mean the lineage of musicians. We only just started making records a hundred years ago, but there's been musicians for millions of years. That's why I was saying the art of a musician is to do it in front of a person. That's the craft, the way it's always been.

This is the part where maybe people will disagree with me, because everyone has been wanting to objectify music forever. "Let's make it a record. Let's make it a tape. Let's make it a DVD." There's this objectifying something that never wants to be objectified. The art of this beautiful craft is not something that you hold in your hand. So, I like to separate those two things because they are very separate to me.

However, I love records. I know there are musicians who love making records but aren't very comfortable in performing. David Berman from Silver Jews, he hated performing. It hurt me to watch it hurt him. But in the same way, he also sacrificed his comfortableness by doing that for us. He knew that it's part of this craft, but he struggled with it. Playing live changes how you play. I'm really into live records because the audience is part of the record. Not just because you hear them, but their energy changes the way the performer is going to play.

To me, that's very interesting.

You've said that when you're working on a song, you feel that it's important to recognize that your first instinct is usually the right one. Did it take you a while to arrive at that conclusion, or have you always felt that way?

You have to be at a point in your craft to be able to say that. And also the song has to also be at a point of... I was actually thinking about this recently. I wrote a song yesterday and I was trying to find the right tempo. It's funny because then I was like, "No, my first instinct was wrong." I thought it was too fast. So, then I did it slow, and it was this kind of other feeling. But then, I did that for 25 or 30 minutes, I went back to the original and I felt the original was better. I wanted to be like this fast punk song.

It's like we want to push our thing onto a child or something, like, "Don't you want to do ballet?" And it's like, "No, Mom, I don't want to do ballet." But the tempo for a record, for me, is not necessarily the tempo live. Live, it's kind of fun to move it all around. But for a record, the tempo is to me the most important. And that's a meditation to be in, because you could be in another tempo when everything seems a lot slower, or it could be the opposite where everything's going way too fast. So, the tempo is really an instinct.

It really can change the entire feeling of a song.

Yes, and it's good to put yourself in the perspective of someone listening. The most important thing about a record or about a song is the first listen, right? It's like the first impression: How do you open the door to that house? How do you give that first impression of the song? It depends on the song, but the ear of another person is also with me sometimes. But it's important that it's within the means of what I want to do.

For this record, I just wanted to be like, "Was that weird enough? Was that your best?" Because I played guitar, I played some drums. The drums were the main thing I needed someone for, even though there are a couple songs I kept my own playing on because it has a vibe. But I had some friends come and play on some songs because there was a point where I wasn't doing the songs justice if I didn't get a proper drummer.

You recorded this all in your own studio, which you wired yourself. Why was that important to you?

I wanted to really learn it. When you wire your studio yourself, you're connected to it. That was important to for me to trust what I'm going to do. Because at the end of the day, I'll be doing it my own way as long as things sound good to me. Probably there's a better way to do what I'm doing, but to me, it's all about sonics.

I read an old interview you did with a bass magazine in which you said you have a less-is-more mentality when it comes to playing. Have you always felt that way?

That's funny you say that because I was thinking about this right before I was making the record—how I wish I was a minimalist. I love minimalism. I think in my mind I'm very inspired by minimalism, but I know that I love editing. It's a strange love, to love editing, right? Because you have to *really* love it to love it. It seems like a chore to most people. But I enjoy putting these things together and then finding the order in the chaos. Whatever it is in my mind, instinctually, I like piecing it together. It's like a palette of colors that you're going to paint with. So, I do love minimalism, and I honestly try to do that all the time. But I'm too complicated. My true self is way more complex.

You started working on the album in Petatlán, Mexico. I've always been interested in how a location where something is being created works its way into the creation itself. How did that play out for you?

Petatlán is a pueblo that's close to the beach town that I go to a lot. I've been going there for 15 years or something. They have one of the most precious, humble churches, and I found myself there a lot for whatever reason. And I was a foreigner. It's very rare for me to feel so foreign because I look like anything, in a sense. I look like a mutt. But in this pueblo, everyone knows everyone by name. So, no matter what I'm going to stick

out. And that made me really submissive to the place's quietness and tempo.

Sometimes when we go to a place, we bring too much of ourselves and we're not aware that the tempo is totally different. It's like you're playing prog and I'm playing a ballad, like we're in two different bands. And so, I'm trying to be more aware of that to not necessarily blend in, but to be accepted, in a sense.

I spent time there right after my exit from Pixies, and I was there for four months. It was very peaceful. I just had an electric piano, and I was very attached to it. I spend so much time on the bass performing, but when I'm not on tour, I try to do all the other instruments. The bass is the breadwinner, but when I'm home I go to the piano and the guitar and the violin. But the piano has been really giving lately.

You're putting this album out yourself. Why did you want to do that?

The second I decided I was making a record I wanted to stop thinking about how I'm going to put it out. To shop it, there's all these things that just gave me anxiety. I didn't want to show it to people to be like, "Hey, do you like this? You want to put it out?" I just can't do that. I don't even know how people do that. I couldn't do it. Just the idea of it was making me not want to finish the record. But I was talking to a friend, and he said, "Just put it out yourself." And I got very excited that weekend because I was like, "I'm going to start my own record label." It gave me that "the world is your oyster" feeling.

I'd been in Pixies for 10 years—a long journey. It's the longest relationship I had with anyone besides my parents or family. What came out of that was, "Well, what should I do? What do I want to be when I grow up?" And the answer was: "I want to be a record label." I came up with the name and the logo and the website that weekend. I did the website myself. It's kind of the thing I've done that I'm most proud of because it's so left field for me. And I love the name, Hideous Humans. It came from Allen Ginsberg's poem ["Howl"] where he talks about angels being like hideous humans.

It's a catchy name.

It felt right, and it made me get back into the studio and keep going. And that's the most important part of any creative process. You know, I read something that Sofia Coppola said, like, "Don't proofread your material as it's coming to you. Just keep going forward, at least like 90 pages before you stop to look back. Because if you look back, you're going to stop completely because you're going to see all the errors. You're going criticize yourself."

And that was so perfect for me to hear because I wanted to keep moving forward knowing there are things that will very easily make you stop. But I love the word "release." It's a perfect word for making a record. I tell everyone how important it is to release what you make, no matter how it is. Don't let it keep changing. It's really important to move on to the next one. Maybe that thing you want to change, you could put in another song. Don't look at everything as so precious. The goal, really, is the release.

Paz Lenchantin recommends:

Cass McCombs - Interior Live Oak (album)

Christopher Owens - I Wanna Run Barefoot Through Your Hair (album)

Lael Neale - Altogether Stranger (album)

Daphneleah Schneider - Releasing Rightness: How Love Heals the Need to be Right (forthcoming book)

Anything by Kim Dallesandro (She has nine books and they're all great.)

Name

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Vocation

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□

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