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As told to Elle Nash, 2522 words.

Tags: Music, Day jobs, Beginnings, Inspiration, Process, Identity, Success.

# On the difference between your job and your work

Musician Phillip Farris (Norma Jean) discusses finding inspiration in the everyday, the value of having a day job, making time for what fires you up, and why everything you do is part of your work.

**Can you talk a little bit about how you started out as a guitarist, working in a couple of different projects and how you managed all of it?**

I don't come from a super musical family or anything, but my dad liked Southern rock, classic rock. When I was a little kid I saw a Guns 'n' Roses video and thought Slash made playing the guitar look cooler than anything else you could ever do. That always kind of stuck with me.

One day when I was about 14, I was skateboarding with a friend and we went to his house after. He had this VHS tape with Nirvana live footage. At one point, Kurt Cobain goes running and dives through the drum set, and in my head I was like, "Okay. Well, I have to play guitar now."

It was the most pure expression of anything I had ever seen. He just happened to be holding the guitar when he dove through that drum set and that was all I needed to see.

I became obsessed and I still am obsessed. I raised myself in a sense. I had an abundance of spare time and I didn't date girls in high school so I just learned how to play guitar instead. I would play for ten to twelve hours a day. To the point where I would give myself tennis elbow and have to take a break for a while.

From there I met some friends that were in a band in town, called Bishop Montgomery Football, which would end up being the first band I played. I never really stopped. I don't really know how to do anything else.

**How did you get over the process of being on a stage and performing live?**

That's the easy part for me. The only place in my life where I feel supremely confident is on a stage. There could be 10 people or 10,000 people, it's all the same to me. If you ever come and see me play, you're seeing a man at his most free. There's no thought that goes into it. That's as free as you could ever want to be, for me, at least. I'm a chronic over thinker and in that moment, I don't have to think about anything.

As long as my gear holds up, there's just very little conscious thought. It just sort of happens.

I'm also a person whose life was changed by live music so I keep it in the back of my mind that every single show is a chance to legitimately change someone's life. Most people have a song or a piece of art they could say changed the course of things for them.

**How did you come to be in Norma Jean? It's a band that's been around for a long time and it's had so many different members, almost different iterations.**

I was driving to work one day and got an Instagram message. It was from Norman Jean's guitar player at the time, a guy named Jess, who I had played in bands with before, before he was in Norma Jean. I could just kind of tell by the way the, "hey, man, what's up?" came across that something was different.

He was like, "Okay. Here's the thing. We need to fill in guitar player for the 10 year anniversary tour of one of our records, and we were wondering if you'd be interested." And I said, "Well, shit, possibly. Yeah."

I got with my partner at the time and talked to her about it. We just had a kid six months prior to this. She said, "Well, you're going to do it, right?" We decided I should do it. So, I did the tour.

Halfway through the tour, at a bar after the show, our bass player was a few adult beverages in. He threw his arm around me and was like, "Philly, I like wish you didn't have a family, dude." I was like, "Ah, shit, John. Thanks, I guess." He was like, "No. I mean I just wish that you were some shitty dude so you could be in my band."

I said, "Well, if that offer were ever be officially extended my way, I would put that through the same steps that brought me onto this tour." That offer was extended my way, and they said they were working on a new album, and asked if I would help. A few months later I was in this multi-million dollar studio in North Dakota recording our album.

Since then, it's been a little bit of a whirlwind. I've done a lot of things that maybe if you were to just look at the circumstances of my early life, I had no real business doing.

I did that record and a bunch of tours. Being a touring musician is pretty difficult at times if you're in a romantic relationship—just listen to pretty much any sad country song you ever heard. So, I took a step back for a while.

Also what they don't tell you is that if your band gets big enough, you have to answer a lot of emails. And I'm a caveman. So, I just had to tell them they're like, "Y'all just take me off the email list and tell me where I need to be and what and when and I'll handle that. Somebody else can take care of all the rest of this stuff."

#### **How do you balance your day job and parenting with being in three different music projects?**

It's not even just those three. I've been flying back and forth to Nashville. Fairly recently working on a secret record for a band that I can't exactly talk about at this point, but it was one of my favorite bands when I was in high school.

I think there's a big difference between your job and your work. A job's just something I sell a little bit of my time to. I've said that my time is worth this much. I'll sell you this much of my time for this much compensation. The work is everything else for me. The work is your day-to-day life and how you treat people, it's not just your music.

I've noticed a lot of people in the music world tend to base their whole entire identity around the band they're in. I place very little of my identity in being a guitar player or musician in any of the bands that I've ever been in, because to me I'm just writing one long song. It's just one long song. In a couple of weeks that song will be 38 years old. In that regard it helps me keep everything on track, in check.

My head is constantly writing music even when I'm at my day job. I'm physically there, but mentally I'm writing music in my head.

#### **What's your day job?**

I work at a place called Piggy Paint, and we make child safe non-toxic like all organic finger nail polish.

#### **That's the most wholesome day job. Are they pretty understanding if you have to fly out to do music?**

Definitely. My boss is one of my best friends, and it's a really family-oriented place. I don't necessarily hide that kind of stuff from them, but most of the people I work with have no idea they work with someone who's been interviewed by *Rolling Stone*.

I try not to be a bragger or talk about myself. A lot of times, I'll have a whole conversation with other musicians before they even find out what band that I play in. And when they do, they're like, "Oh, shit. I've just been sitting here talking about my little band this whole time." But to me, it's not just a little band. It's not any different than what I do.

#### **How has COVID affected how you create?**

I haven't played to shows since the last Norma Jean tour. It ended, then lockdown started. [Playing live] is a real cathartic thing for me because it's a very physical act, first of all, but beyond that, I put a lot of myself into it, into a live performance, and because of that my body is all beat to hell and I don't have a sense of smell anymore.

I've got my nose caved in and my teeth are all busted up. There's a lot that goes into it. But also, you get a lot out of it if you do it right. That part has definitely been lacking. But the musical output has grown exponentially. During the lockdown, I learned how to do some home recording stuff just by myself. Off the strength of the home recordings, I got the gig to work with that band I have been going to Nashville for. I think live music and music is not just art—if it's done right, it's high art.

It has been a little bit tough to feel like you have that purpose. You think that maybe sometimes you're really only good at that one thing. In my head it's like, "Yeah. I can change people's lives every night." So you start to think, "Well, that's gone now. I'm not going to change anybody's anything working in this warehouse." In my weaker moments I think things like that.

**What is the most challenging thing about being an artist, a musician and being a parent?**

My son is amazing. He has his own favorite bands. He can tell you every member of Rage Against the Machine and what instrument they play. If your son knows you're in a music video, you're going to have to watch that music video a million times. But it's kind of cool. I said that Slash made the guitar look like the coolest thing in the world, right? Kurt Cobain made it look possible. So, my hope is that, because I compulsively play the guitar even if I'm just sitting on the couch or I'm hanging out with my son. And then, he'll get his guitar. He doesn't really know how to play it, but he'll make up songs. He'll be like, "Daddy, I wrote this song." And then, he'll just start yelling and shaking his head and going crazy.

So, that part is cool. The travel is tough when you have a kid. But I also know from the other end of the spectrum, raising a kid is hard when your partner is out touring. The personal life stuff can be messy, historically speaking.

It's amazing how many people don't have a thing. I think everybody needs a thing. Something to point themselves at or something to occupy their mind. A lot of times physically throughout your day-to-day life, you have to do some stupid things that you don't like doing.

So, if I stay there mentally and physically I'm going to go a little crazy. If I have too much time to sit and think, I'll think myself into a pit. One time I was in a pretty depressed spot and I'd gone through a breakup and I was living with my dad. I went to him one day. I didn't have a job at that time. I was like, "Dad, I think I need to go see someone. Like a therapist or something." My dad goes, "What you need to do is get a good job." It sounds like a very dad answer and my dad was a master at that. He didn't speak a whole lot. He was real quiet guy. But when he did, there would always be some kind of wisdom in it. He was totally right.

He told me if you just sit here and think all day, you're not going to sleep and you're not going to eat and you're going to feel awful. The balance can be pretty tough. I would never say I had balanced it well all the time. My life calls for a certain amount of tolerance and leniency and patience from people. I'm very thankful of that. Most of the people in my life allow me that patience.

**What is something like a piece of advice you wish someone had given you when learning to approach music when you first started?**

I wish more people knew that there weren't rules. There's no rules to it. It's just sound. And a melody is just as much the space between the notes you play as it is the notes you choose. So, even if they're all wrong notes, you repeat all those wrong notes in a specific pattern, that's a melody.

When I was in high school, I tried to take a music theory class, because I still can't read music at all. I tell people all the time, "I don't know how to play guitar. I don't know how. I just can do it." I don't know how music works. I just know how the music that I write works.

I also wished someone had told me to learn the rules before you just start breaking them, because once you learn the rules, you can learn all kinds of cool ways to break them.

The older I get the more I realized how little I know and I'm just constantly on the hunt to find out the next thing that I don't know. I think a big thing is that people have is a really big problem of saying, "I don't know." If more people admitted they don't know, they could learn more. That as soon as you say, "I don't know about this," there's your opportunity to know it and to learn it.

**So you're saying curiosity is a really big driving factor for you in finding inspiration?**

I would say I'm a very curious person. I'm constantly thinking like: Have you ever noticed how people only walk where there's concrete? Even though everybody knows the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. But instead of just walking straight, they'll follow that sidewalk, even if it's longer.

I find inspiration in just that-Why? I don't have all the answers, but man, I can give you a lot of questions. I can't give the answers but I can give you a lot of questions. And I think a lot of times the question is just as important as the answers.

Phillip Farris Recommends:

Find a thing. A thing that occupies your thoughts. A thing that keeps you up at night thinking about it. A thing that fires you up. I think it's alarming how many people don't have a thing.

Realize that you can't steer something without first limiting it power.

You can only lose the games you choose to play. I'm undefeated at pool. (There's a greater metaphor here)

Never let a dog win tug of war. Ever.

Never let a man in flip flops tell you nothin.

Name

Phillip Farris

Vocation

musician

Fact

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