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As told to Max Freedman, 2376 words.

Tags: Music, Focus, Money, Beginnings.

On not compromising on your vision

Musician Rahill on being resourceful, taking supportive day jobs, and never backing down from your vision.

Right now, as we're speaking, you're about a month out from releasing your newest album, *Flowers at Your Feet*, and you're also a visual artist. How do you make the time and energy for all your creative pursuits, especially when you're in a period of promoting one of them so strongly?

It's fun to have your hands in different avenues of creation and have different practices because they inform each other, so it's a natural process for me. When I have to buckle down and focus, it's weird because I have this huge source of inspiration coming to me, because I'm seeing how the visuals affect the audience and the interaction. I want to jump into art mode to make more visuals for the album [right now] because two of the songs have been released, but the whole record is coming out in May [a month after this conversation]. It goes hand in hand and they inform each other.

Right now, I'm trying to balance...I've made the music, so now I'm trying to give my attention and direction to the art. Some musicians choose artists to work with from outside, but because I have an art background, I like to be tasked with that part of it as well.

I'm intrigued by the part where, as you're interacting with your audience and they see the visuals, you're getting more inspiration, but you're not necessarily immediately acting on it. Can you talk about holding back in that situation and not running headfirst into new inspiration?

There are reasons why there are boundaries. I just did a music video that took a large sum of money to make. I don't have that kind of finance. I could probably be immersed if I had this trove of endless funding. Your head wants to jump to, "Oh, I have this idea for this and that," but you're on a schedule. So it's like, "Okay, I have to focus on this next track that's coming out."

From this last release with Beck for the song "Fables," this morning, I woke up to a couple of texts from friends, like, "Wow. Just saw the music video." It inspired me. I just bought a Super 8 camera and an old camcorder because I'm like, "This is what I want. To do this."

So many musicians have talked about music not being a reliable source of income, and yet promoting music, let alone making it, is expensive. Can you talk about how you balance limited resources with your creative ambitions?

I've always had that struggle. I've become resourceful because I had to. Aside from art, I didn't grow up super privileged, and I learned from my parents. I think it's about sourcing, [for example, music video] props from thrift stores. Really, it's about being able to have the time. Luckily, I can afford to have the time to make it work, but a huge struggle with most artists is that they don't have the resources, but they also don't have the time because they're working other jobs. I feel really grateful that I can afford to give it extra time instead of [sending] it away...like, "I'm paying X, Y, and Z for it all." Being able to do it yourself, DIY, cuts costs so effectively.

Art is therapy for me, so I have to do it, too. If I wasn't doing that, I'd be drawing or whatever. It's just making the time and the commitment, and it's diligence, [such as] sourcing things from thrift stores. That doesn't come very easy. You can't call a [thrift store] and look up their catalog, but that's where I got a camcorder and a Super 8, and that's where I got all the props, from the fabric to the miniature furniture for this one specific scene, to the wardrobe.

It sounds like you don't have a day job anymore. I'm curious if there was a period where you were balancing a day job with your creative pursuits and how you struck that balance.

When I first moved to New York about 13 years ago, I worked in fashion as an assistant stylist. Aside from that, I've only had jobs that allowed for some freedom. My longest job was working for this couple who are an actor-director [couple]. They did *Wonder Showzen*—he [John Lee] directed the last *Pee-wee Herman* movie—so they're bigger directors and they're freaks. They were very, like, "Here, take these instruments," or "Have you ever seen this?" I feel like I've always had [creative-adjacent] jobs.

Before that, I was working at a record store [Academy Records]. That was my last real job, just showing up, clocking in. Even with them being jobs, I still was able to, in some capacity, work on my art. Literally, working at a record store, you're free to look through an entire archive of music.

I made the choice to [leave]. I was like, "hell no to the fashion world." It's so extreme and hard, and you do have to sacrifice a lot of your time and energy, and it just wasn't serving [me], and it's hard for me to do that. Not that I lack the discipline. It's just that it's hard for me to justify spending that much time [on] something that's not fulfilling. Luckily, I had jobs that scratched that itch or were just supportive.

How did your time at Academy Records—being exposed to so much music, so many musicians, and so many music lovers—shape your own creative process?

I was there for six years. When I first started working there, the people—like the owner, Mike [Davis]—they're huge sources of knowledge. He's just an institution of information. It was incredible because, with music, you can never know everything, because every day, you can find a new song you've never heard before. It was very cool because, I feel like when you're involved in a music scene, it's sort of like, "I play in a band, and it's rock." But [in my band, *Habibi*], there's psychedelic influence, Middle Eastern influence, but you are in that zone, so the shows you play are just within that.

I grew up listening to so many different kinds of music. I love hip-hop, I love jazz, especially jazz in New York, and it was so cool to be able to tap into all this music [at Academy Records] that honored the amalgam that formed [my] first love of music and how it opened up my world as a kid. To be able to explore that really helped me reconnect with that initial genre-less love and appreciation of music. I think that really did inspire this record, because it did such a true job of connecting me back to that feeling.

You've brought your music into fashion settings—you've played live at fashion shows. Can you talk about how bringing your music into a visual medium shapes how you perform or create it?

I have such stage fright that all my hopes and dreams [for] the performative part go to the wind when I start performing. But...for the last New York Fashion Week, I performed songs from [*Flowers at Your Feet*]. Don't get me wrong, style, I love. I love to dress up and costume...I like the idea of different performances, depending on the environment, asking something different of you.

That was really cool because it was outside, but it was capturing New York, but also fashion. It resonated with me because, [when] you're walking in New York, you can't walk outside with sweatpants. I mean, you can, but you just never know who you're going to run into, so you're always dressed well. I feel like that performance came naturally to me because I got to wear my nice clothes that I felt comfortable in, in a setting, an environment literally next to a soccer field [where] I play, but with the fashion world there. It felt comforting to be in that environment. I need to always find a source of comfort within these performative places.

Fashion is a form of creativity. How much does the resourcefulness you were talking about earlier with thrifting play into the creative portion of your fashion?

Oh, 100%. The last time I was in the city, I was at something that **Vogue* was covering, and everyone was like, "Oh, where is that suit from?" It's an \$8 suit from a thrift store. I really do not buy new. I try to not buy new for multiple reasons. I just don't think new clothes, new fashion is...I don't think the materials are what they used to be. I don't think the tailoring is what it used to be. It's also such a waste.

If I work with a brand [and] I get free clothes, then that's great. But I feel like...when you're growing up, there's this point you hit where you're like, "Oh, it's cool to thrift." I've seen a lot of my friends outgrow that, where they're just like, "I don't have the time or patience to go to the thrift store," or they're just suddenly grossed out by thrift stores. That is lost on me. I love to thrift. I can spend hours thrifting.

I still look at old archival fashion brands, and then I'll be like, "Oh, that's such a cool thing." The inspiration does come from a bigger place. But I always love a challenge to find something like that instead of typing it in Google like, "Where can I get a red leather vest?" I'm like, "Maybe I'll find it on eBay, if it is on the computer, or at the thrift store." That's what I'll be looking for.

Memories are a big component of *Flowers at Your Feet*. Can you talk about how memories, as opposed to present-tense thoughts and experiences, inspire your creative process?

I think I'm a collector. It goes along with the records thing that we talked about, goes along with the thrifting things. I feel like I collect memories, and I have all this ephemera, whether it's things passed to me, something I found significant and held onto, an empty pack of cigarettes from Iran, just a cool thing. It can be so meaningless to the naked eye, but I put significance in that memory [or] object.

This record was so fun for me because there are so many random voice memos, recordings, field recordings, just a place. Also, it's a big archive for me too. [For it] to be called nostalgia, I get it, because it is really nostalgia. People who have listened to it, they're like, "It makes me think about this or that," and it is to honor that, but it's also to connect.

The significant part about [the ephemera] for me is that it informs who I am. It's so with me that it's still present. It's absolutely made me make this music, and it informs my relationship to my world because these things that mean a lot to me have shaped my relationships to myself, to the people in my life, to my surroundings. I think memory has significance in the present tense too.

Some of what you're saying goes back to identity, and your official label bio says that your melodies gesture toward the Iranian-American household you grew up in. Can you give a small bit of insight into how identity plays a role in your creativity, but also what incorrect assumptions about this, if any, you've encountered?

Being a child of immigrants is an interesting thing. It's an interesting time for it too. There's a lot of focus and talk about that. A lot of artists are identifying with that struggle, and I've always been at the crux. I've always tried to play up this identity thing, like, I'm too American for being Iranian, I'm too Iranian for being American. I love the relationship that it's built, because it helps me understand myself and connect that identity to the places that felt uncomfortable before.

I think it's an innate quality in me that I've always felt the need to express. I'm as much a Midwestern kid as I am an Iranian kid. I think it's cool to have that, to speak to that, but I don't want to be held to just, oh, Iranian, big emphasis on that, because every part of who I am is important.

To what extent do you feel like you've built a path for yourself outside of traditional systems, and how have you gone about doing this?

I don't hold back. I am really about seeing something and fulfilling it. I just started playing music when I came to New York. I didn't play it in my teens or early 20s. I don't know when I started, but it just is easy for me to manifest. I'm not timid or shy, and I feel like that's gotten me far. Asking, even, Beck to collaborate on a song. We became friends and it was cool. I just go for it, and I feel like it's not the way a lot of artists do their thing.

It comes from my background. I'm a tenacious soccer player. I go for things, and I feel like that's really helped me because I know what I can see, what I want, and I aim for it, and I don't really compromise. If you don't try, even if you lose, even if it's a no—which I've gotten, I've been rejected—it's still like you'll live with never knowing.

That's how I've done things and how I've pushed forward without having to piggyback on a fund or a person. I have a vision and I believe in it. Just being direct with what I want to do and seeking out the people. If I didn't have representation, I would go directly to the booking person here, or that person or brand I want to work with. I just go for it.

Rahill Recommends:

Every Sense Engaged:

Les Blank, Gap Toothed Woman (film)

June Jordan, Directed by Desire (book)

Saffron (spice)

Hollyhock (flower)

Name
Rahill

Vocation
musician

Fact

Bailey Robb

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