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As told to Miriam Garcia, 2198 words.

Tags: Music, Design, Culture, Activism, Independence, Adversity, Multi-tasking, Identity.

# On learning through doing the work

**Musician Raquel Berrios on deriving support and inspiration from your community, the importance of an outside perspective, and finding ways to keep going. You started your career as a textile designer. How did you transition into making music and singing?**

Since I was a little kid, my first love was music. My parents were music fans. My mom always had music in the background and my dad is a crazy record collector. My undergrad was in architecture and then I did my Masters in textile design. In design school, I learned how to establish a creative process. When I actually started to think that I could make music on my own, I approached it from a design standpoint. They're not that disconnected; you're dealing with something physical and you're dealing with aesthetics. Sound has texture and there're so many physical qualities to sound. So, in a way, I never felt that they were different.

**Your band Buscabulla has a strong stage presence. How do you prepare yourself before performing?**

I go through phases. When I was in New York I was just very inspired by a Nuyorican sort of obsession with the Puerto Rican flag, and how they always had to wear it. I wanted to re-appropriate it in my own weird way. I don't know if you want to call it deconstructing or a more postmodern or more minimal take, but I always wanted to take something—I didn't want it to seem like I was literally dressing as a Nuyorican would do on the street. I wanted to take elements of it and then make something new.

Now that we moved to Puerto Rico, it's a different kind of sensibility. Lately I've been obsessed with the local carnivals and the traditional dresses. I like to take cultural elements, and what people wear normally, and then I extrapolate it and make it my own and integrate it as a sort of hold to the culture.

**You and your partner decided to move to Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria hit the Island and you recorded your first album, Regresa, there. How did you decide to move to a place where uncertainty was constant?**

My partner Luis and I got to the point where New York had run its toll. And even though New York is a wonderful city, probably really great for creatives because there are so many creative people and you have so much access to performances and artistic venues and stuff like that, it really stopped having its magic for us. The call to come back home was just so much greater. And New York is going through this phase where things are so expensive, and the human, simpler qualities, or the communities, have been displaced by big corporate interests and the city is becoming this weird unlivable place.

Coming home felt like it was the place where we needed to be, or where we could find our most authentic selves. Even though it came with a lot of uncertainty, and it's an island that has been in an economic crisis for more than a decade, and it had just been struck by a hurricane, we really didn't care. We felt that this is where we needed to be because it was home and it was a place where we needed to make a record.

**How was the process of readapting to life in Puerto Rico? You were away for 10 years and people change, communities readapt, and people and life move forward. I'm sure that you changed as well.**

It wasn't easy at all. New York keeps you so busy that you can't really stop to think about who you are and what you do. And as soon as I got here I was confronted with like, "What are you about now? Now that this whole context of the city has been taken away who are you?" It was really hard and really beautiful.

**Do you think you found some answers to what you mentioned about who you are?**

Yeah and the interesting thing is that the record literally maps out that process. It goes from that first

initial energy of going through the process of that weirdness of adjusting to a new place and just feeling anxiety and observing everything that was going on around me and the country. There is a song called "Nydia" where I have this cathartic moment where I'm in pain and feeling weird in my own skin. So much is about accepting that things are never going to be perfect or great and the same as with Puerto Rico. It's both a recognition that this place has its flaws, and I also had deep flaws. And it wasn't until I was able to really look at them in the eye that I was able to just be like, "I'm cool with this. I'm okay with things not being perfect. I can still thrive even when things aren't perfect."

**After Hurricane Maria, you co-created the Puerto Rico Independent Musicians and Artists (PRIMA) Fund. This happened in an environment of emergency because artists needed support and assistance. There wasn't a lot of time to think about details and processes because assistance was needed immediately. That resonates with what is happening now. How was the process of creating this initiative under a state of urgency?**

I think everybody just felt so helpless. I remember telling Luis, "Is there really anything that we could do? I really don't know if we could, do you think this is possible?" I got together with Annie Cordero, who is also a Puerto Rican musician but born and raised in the States, and we just got together and we found a fiscal sponsor quickly and immediately—like within maybe like a month or two of the hurricane hitting—we just started collecting money.

It wasn't just me and Annie, we were reaching out to a community. Bands from California, Chicago, and Texas, and bands that were either Puerto Rican or that had Puerto Rican members, started doing benefit shows. So this really interesting network was created to support musicians. That's beautiful. And sometimes you don't have to do that much. You set up a system and then you use your relationships to get the message out. We already had our band platform and our social media, but we also had PR people and then it just became bigger and bigger. In the first year, we were able to give like around 40 or 50, \$500 micro-grants to people. We knew people that didn't even have money to eat. It was really bad. And musicians don't have a safety net.

**Is the fund still active?**

Yeah, when we have emergencies we activate emergency events or alliances. After the earthquake, we sent out this relief application, and we reach out to alliances and we worked with the Jazz Foundation to provide grants for jazz musicians. When we don't have emergencies, what we've been doing is supporting artists on another level. We were doing this showcase in New York where every summer we would bring two or three bands and we would give them exposure, get them into a press room to promote their new material.

We've done events here in Puerto Rico to do fundraising as well. We're trying to be this organization that supports musicians when things are good and when things are bad; we're trying to become this active thing and it can be smaller and it could be big depending on where Annie and I are at because it's totally grassroots. Annie and I don't make any money off of it. It's complex, but I think that's just the world we live in now and these types of things are necessary.

**After your experience with PRIMA and working with your network and friends, what do you think artists can do to support themselves and other artists?**

We're in the independent music industry, we don't have big labels or big live events, or big machinery behind us. That machinery can achieve a lot of things. But in independent music, you only have your music community. it's just a really different world we live in and making music is just not what it used to be.

I think the only way to make it stronger, is through your community and your social networks. You put your record out, your friends put it out, you make concerts together, and then people identify you as a group of artists. That's something really beautiful about New York. I felt like I connected with a lot of artists there that were making music in Spanish or that maybe had Latino parents and that had a sensibility. I like to identify myself as part of that community. I feel the stronger we are, the better.

**You have a strong network of musician friends and collaborators. How do other collaborators figure in your work? What's the most helpful thing about working with others?**

First of all, Luis and I work together all the time. We're not the kind of musicians that are constantly working with producers and songwriters. We make all our songs, we self-produce. There is something dangerous about that, too, because it's almost like when you're with your own thoughts and then you can start telling yourself things that might not be productive at all. And, it's not until you sit down with a person and you tell them what you've had in your mind through the week, that you're externalizing what you feel. You put it into the air and then you're sharing it with another person who's going to see your situation from a completely different point of view.

So collaboration helps you to see things from another eye, and you learn to look at your work from another perspective. So for example, when we were working on the record with Nick Hakim, he just came and we hung out and it was just amazing because it was another person understanding your music from a different point of view. By the time he came, I was really insecure about my songs and not feeling sure and then you could see how he would react and he would say "This is amazing" or "This one's not so great". As soon as somebody says, "I love this," you kind of start believing it. You believe in your work again. It's not that I'm easily swayed by other people's opinions, but I'm definitely swayed by an opinion of a person that I admire and that I really think is talented and does their work well.

**What is something you wish somebody told you before you began to make music?**

I wish people would have told me that it's not so precious. You realize it's only through making work that what you do is revealed to you. You realize that you have to develop patience, that every day you do work and if it's not great or if it's not really where it has to be, that you don't have to feel anxious or second guess yourself. The more that I do this, and the older that I get, the more patience I've developed. I realized you just have to keep going.

One day you realize that you have this whole body of work, that it's cohesive and makes sense. It reveals what you've been thinking. I remember I took a thesis class and one of the exercises was to just write a bunch of words. Then, when you read all the words, you're like, "Damn, this is where my mind is at." It's not revealed any other way than through the work.

My approach to making music is super instinctual, so there was a lot of second-guessing, and it's only through making the work that it's revealed to you. I wish that maybe I was a little bit more prepared for that because I felt like I suffered in the beginning and things took more time, or I second-guessed a lot of it and it took away the fun from the work. Now I feel like I can have more fun because I know what's on the end and I know that it takes time to get to the place where you want to be.

**What do you think helped you to overcome those obstacles?**

Probably through suffering. It makes you grow. All those years of struggling in New York, and going to work and coming back home and working on music after putting my daughter to bed and countless hours of rehearsal... You realize that you have it, but you only really discover it through putting yourself through it. There's no other way to know. It's that struggle and pain. It's a cliché, but it's true. Experience makes you more knowledgeable. I realized that the best way to learn is through your own process.

Raquel Berrios recommends:

Recipe: Asopao de pollo with arañitas

Art Gallery: Embajada (San Juan, PR)

Music: *The Ambient Collection* by Art of Noise

Place: The beaches on the west side of Puerto Rico

Instrument: Yamaha SY35 (Vector Synthesizer)

Name

Raquel Berrios

Vocation


Musician, singer, textile designer

Fact


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