

On making work that's true to you



Musician Will Wiesenfeld (Baths, Geotic) discusses the value of regimentation, living outside of a creative hub, and working with what you have.

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As told to Tiana Dueck, 3401 words.

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I've been listening to your music for so long—I'm thrilled to pick your brain today.

You caught me at an interesting time. I'm in between a lot of things—I'm coming off of a long relationship with a manager, we've amicably separated. So I'm on my own for now. I also don't have a booking agent right now.

I'm in a very transitional period moving away from whatever it used to be in my *world of shit*...I just got off this tour, the first I've done in years. The last time I toured, right before the pandemic, was a short run with this band Anamanaguchi, some really good friends of mine. It was invigorating to get back into. I know all my regimented bullshit that I have to do to make it sustainable, like vocal warm ups and not eating four hours before a show so that I don't barf.

I'm excited to keep putting out music. I put out a couple singles, which is like the first music I put out in years, and all this other stuff. It's a cozy ramping upwards, but I still seem sort of off the grid. It's a cool time, because I'm swinging back into it again, full time, in a small sense.

So you're working towards another album?

I have one that's been completed for a long time and very ready to put out, but I'm playing the game of seeing if I can get it attached to a label. If not, I'll self-release. I just toured with Speedy Ortiz. They self-released their last record, and it's been amazing for them. If I do that I want to make sure I have enough infrastructure in place that I don't fuck it up. But, you know, we'll see how it goes.

Another part of getting back from tours is that now I'm on much more regimented exercise again. I have timings for how I have to eat and all this stuff.



“Do I Make the World Worse” single art. Photo by Ben Zazarra.

How does that kind of wellness routine flow with your creative processes?

It's almost black and white. If I have a day where I exercise and a day where I don't, in terms of what becomes of my mood and *creative prowess*, I'm more motivated to do stuff if I've done something physical. I also kind of hate doing something physical. If I get it done in the morning before anything, then I'm usually good to go. But the other problem is that it's strength training. The stuff that I have to do for it is like, eat a *metric fuck ton* of chicken practically every day, which has its side effects. I work around that.

It sounds like you enjoy having a bit of a schedule worked out. I was listening to the 2.0 podcast and you and your brother are so organized, like, “Okay, I have five points...” and he's going to start with this and then you'll go on to that.

That's so funny you listen to our podcast because it's a very goofy version of myself. My brain creatively doesn't do well with unpredictability. There's a lot of producers who will be like, "I'm going to make a track on the train." Or "I'm going to do something while we're in the van and work on music." I can't do it. I'd just want to hang out and chat with people. The only exception is maybe a coffee shop, because I'm tuned out to it. Having a schedule or something regimented and keeping it simple works really well for me.

Living in LA, which is such an industry city, do you ever feel social pressure? Do you manage to keep yourself centered on your own ambitions?

I have always felt completely out of step with everyone. I don't know if that's symptomatic of depression, anxiety, or ADHD, or if it's just the way I am. But I've always lived outside of the circle of where creative people are most of the time. I live in Santa Clarita right now, which is way outside of the city.

I've never needed to be right where all the art and people are, because all of that also serves as distraction and I'm easily distracted. I can't control the desire to go out, so living a good distance away from where things are happening forces me to be more intentional about when I'll go [out] or when I'll stay in. But it's always nice to check in with the city and go to shows.

You're still in close enough proximity to be able to go out on the town if you want to. What's one of the biggest challenges you've faced over the years?

When I was making *Obsidian*, which came out in 2013, I had debilitating stomach problems. I couldn't do anything other than move from the bed to the couch to the bathroom. It was horrible. I was in this endless cycle of doing nothing. But then...The main focal point of inspiration for that record became that apathy I was feeling. I had never had an absence of feeling before but that's what it came to. I just needed to exist, and eventually I became obsessed with trying to write about apathy, but turning it into a pop record somehow, because those are the most conflicting possible ideas in my brain.

Oh, I can totally see that.

It's dark in a lot of ways, but it's not coming from darkness, it's coming from apathy. It showed me that any negative experience in my life can be translated into music, and so can any positive experience.



Photo by Jesse Clark.

What kind of habits put you in a good space to be creative?

Over the past five months I've felt really invigorated. My whole situation has changed, and it's very new and fresh. I think anytime I have an amazing hookup or relationship moment with a guy and it's lasted longer than I expected it to, that can tie into my excitement to write about something. I'm constantly making voice notes or writing lyrics down. I'll add it into this pile of notes I have in my phone. So when I'm feeling the push to be creative but I haven't started anything yet, I'll work with that and start something.

"Do I Make the World Worse" started from a rhythmic idea that I couldn't get out of my head. I kept thinking about it, it's this goofy post-punky, rolling down a hill type of rhythm. Very repetitive and kind of boring on its own, but in my head I could hear this layered, aggressive version of it. So, my voice note is very embarrassing. I'm singing it into my phone, and I think later in the voice note I talk about it. I'm like, "Okay, so it goes like this, blah blah blah," and so on. As stupid as that is, that's the genesis for the entire track that came out of it! It was something I couldn't escape thinking about.

I've been really obsessed with the word "relentless," in terms of making music that feels relentless. I think a lot of the record that isn't out yet is relentless in that way. I've been inspired by this band called Gilla Band. That is very, very loud and, in my head, has the same sort of relentlessness in terms of ethos and execution. It sounds very confident. There's this era in my head where all I want to be doing is pummeling, relentless, intense music.

Do you think part of that might come from being further into your career as a musician now, and wanting to own the confidence of that?

I think so, yeah. Bluntly, it's also confidence in my body. I haven't felt comfortable in my own skin for a very, very long time. But because I've been exercising and getting out in the world again and trying to meet men, I have a different confidence than I've had before.

My head is telling me I'm not afraid to be worse and weirder with the music that I'm making. I'm trying to make stuff that is more uncomfortable for me but still satisfying in a different way, which I think could turn some people off.

How do you decipher whether something is a Baths or a Geotic track?

It gets murkier now, but often I view Geotic as passive listening and Baths as active listening, so that it's kind of a distinct separation. But at the same time, I think there are Baths tracks that could go one way or the other, and same with Geotic tracks, so I never know anymore. I don't think I have to be critical about it.

That makes sense. I had written down that Geotic feels like a diary, whereas Baths feels like a whole published book.

That's good, I like that separation. I'll say this, there's more intent with the Baths material. Like, I'm trying to say something, whereas I feel like the Geotic material is more selfish. I'm like "Oh, I wonder what this would sound like. I want to do this." Whereas Baths is like, "I want to make a song." Or whatever it is. What's really nice, is I don't even care about who's listening or what audience will be perceptive to it. It's all selfish. It's all like, "What do I want out of this?"

I think holding that kind of attitude helps your music stand out!

Well, thank you! It contrasts with when I'm writing for an audience, like for a film or something for a director's vision. The whole magic of making my own records is that I'm writing for myself.

I am very lucky that for all of the scoring projects I've done I've worked under people whose work I really respect. It makes it that much easier to let go of personal feelings about the music I'm writing for their project and understand that even though something else may be my favorite sound, it makes more sense for their vision to approach it in a different way. I think that their visions for what they want are correct. There's no butting heads creatively.

I remember listening to Cerulean a lot, around the time it came out (2010), and how that album got so much love.

Cerulean is by far the biggest thing I've done. I never expected it to do as well as it did. I think other people who worked with me did and saw that. And that's why they helped push it to where it got and get it a proper release. It was also my first label release. It was my first anything.

I wasn't realistic about what it's like to maintain a career in independent music. Even though that success was great and I had so much fun touring, there was so much other stuff I wanted to do. Immediately the thing that I did right after, *Obsidian*, was not the same. It was completely opposite from what people were expecting or wanted, which is probably a bad move for people who are thinking about it in a money-making sense. But for me, artistically and personally, it was exactly what I wanted to do regardless of how it performed.

I still stuck to, "I'm going to do whatever I want, whenever I want." Because it's the only way, in my brain, that I will have any longevity in doing art.

With your "puzzle piece" type of process, do you ever finish a song and then have to listen back to it and figure out what it is? I do music as a hobby, often I'll finish a song and won't even know how to play it.

Very much so. I'll finish a song and be like, "Oh shit, if I'm gonna play this live I have to know how to sing it." Luckily in my process I only really take a song to its full ending if I have something in my head which I

like to call the bones of a song. There's some element in it, whether it's a lyric, a melody, or one set of sounds in it that is an unremovable part of whatever it's becoming. Like, the skeletal structure of whatever I'm attempting. So, if I can sense something like that and love it, then usually the whole thing comes together.

Like with "Do I Make the World Worse," there was just this rhythm that's been the bones of the song the whole time. I knew that was always the thing that was important, and I was gonna work on finding what that wanted to give me. That was the part that was important, but there could have been like six or seven different outcomes to that one idea. That's also an exercise I've done in the past, taking one skeletal structure for a song, taking five different attempts at it, and using the best version.

What are your thoughts on having a creative community?

Building a community in a personal way is a wonderful thing when you're talking about making friends and meeting new people. I think creatively it can, sometimes without people realizing it, become stifling. That there can be a slow sort of homogeneity that starts to appear when you have too many like-minded people who work within close proximity to each other. So I have a conflicting relationship with the entire concept of forming a creative community because I like that my music doesn't necessarily add up to things that make sense with other people all the time.

I think there's this idea which persists that community is the only way to make your music valid in the eyes of other people or in the eyes of your peers, and I don't think that's true. You can be a complete isolationist loner in what you do and that is still valid and cool. It doesn't mean your music is uncreative or unfulfilling. It's just different.

All my favorite music in the world is shit that is super singular. My idols have always been people like Björk and Mica Levi. You can hear a song of theirs and just be like, "I know exactly who that is, and also I don't know what sounds like it."

I feel like when you come into a community, it can be so important to know your own voice and to have isolated enough to bring yourself to that, or else the loudest voice becomes the voice of the community.

Exactly. That's kind of what I'm thinking about with all of that, is that I think I'm not a very...confident person in terms of being next to or with other artists. So maybe part of it is that I'm nervous about losing my voice to something or someone who has more confidence in what they do.

At the same time, that's not totally correct, because I'm very confident in the music that I make. I don't think that'll ever change. But, I think I have a healthy, comfortable amount of skepticism when it comes to how ingrained you become in a creative community. Again, this is entirely outside of the conversation of community as a *personal thing*.

Do you find that your personal community finds its way into your creativity?

Yes, but it's much wider than music. My personal community is all across a broad spectrum of people. Another big part of that too is having gay community. I'm going to more events and bar nights than I ever did in the past. The director and a lot of the crew on the film that I scored are queer, and we've been going to stuff together, so it's like this creative part of my life is meeting this much more openly gay part of my life. Those things smear together and it's good.

Definitely. On another note, I just recalled when I first watched the "Actually Smiling" (Geotic) music video. I really liked it, and I've always wondered about the behind the scenes.

I will either have a whole shot list, or the opposite where it's a performance video where I have a locked-in idea but it's improvised from there. My music video for "Projecting a Life" was the second kind, just doing what we want with a couple of rules in place.



“Projecting a Life” cover art by Will Wiesenfeld and Jesse Clark.

But “Actually Smiling” was very much a shot-list. I knew the edit before we ever filmed it. Although there was still room to improvise. That day was the hottest day in LA that entire summer. It was like 104 degrees. So, everybody in the video is just wet and glowing with sweat, tired as fuck. The entire video was shot in one day. We had a bunch of locations in West LA. I was, like, “Oh, I want the biking to happen here, because it looks really cute. I want the second area of biking to happen over here.” I did a little bit of location scouting beforehand, and then we went and did our bullshit, very guerrilla style filming.

I’ve done it enough now that I know the right people to reach out to, but also now everybody’s older and professional. So, the overhead on making something like that costs a lot.

Do you have any plans for bigger produced music videos?

There's no way I'm gonna make a larger budget video unless somebody gives me the money for it. I made a video ("Mikaela Corridor") with a good friend, Dan Streit, that I love and I think was great. But if I'm looking back at it now, the cost of it outweighed the amount of good it did for myself at the time.

I don't think it was a good investment. It wasn't an extravagant video, it's just how much it costs if you're doing it. It's one of those things where that was a fun process, but also a massive lesson where I was like, *this is how much the thing costs if you're really going at it*. So, the idea of trying to accomplish as much as I can with as little as possible is a very comfortable state of being for me. That's how I've always made music, that's how I've made a ton of videos, and it's how I can continue to make videos in the future. I'm kind of reverting back to this understanding with myself that it's okay to do things without sizing up. Like, I can tour by myself, and that way I can keep the overhead as low as possible and actually make a living off of it again.

With my upcoming new record, even though it's more band-oriented, if I were to tour with a band it might destroy me financially. I might try and tour by myself and see if that works. It's a lot to think about. I am always thinking about it.

Yeah, make the most of what you have.

It's basically about learning what works for your tier of whatever success you have and working with that. Yet, also still trying to push past that. Trying to make the best music you can and hoping that the right thing lands or you get it to the right person. You gotta do the hustle and all that bullshit, and not beat yourself up about it if it doesn't become the biggest thing in the world.

The most important thing still, regardless of any level of success in music ever, is making the music that's true to what you want to make. As long as I keep doing that, if my success never gets better or worse, I'm still gonna be fulfilled in the way that I need to be. I'm doing what I want to be doing.

Will Wiesenfeld Recommends:

being in a jacuzzi or hot springs with a cool breeze

daytime hangouts

unabashedly horny illustrators

Name

Will Wiesenfeld

Vocation

musician

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Corey Sherman