

On not getting stuck



An interview with musician Nikki Sixx

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2088 words.

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Outside of your life in Mötley Crüe you've managed to live a varied creative life, most notably as a writer and a photographer. You've also spoken about the ways in which having some sort of creative practice really helped you in dealing with addiction.

Creativity really is a version of scratching an itch. Once you've scratched it, it continues to itch. You ever notice that about an itch? You might think, "I'm just going to scratch it one time and it'll go away," but it's never true. You just keep scratching it. That is how creativity feels. I get these urges and I have to pursue them. And if I put myself in a vulnerable state when doing so, it's usually the best thing that can happen to me.

Obviously, I've spent much of my life playing bass and I've written a lot of songs on guitar, but I'll be the first person to say that it's not exactly rocket science. Songs like "Live Wire" and "Kickstart My Heart" have a very basic chord structure. They're simple. It doesn't take a great guitar player to play them. Mick Mars would take those guitar parts and turn them into something amazing—he'd make them shoot through the roof—but underneath all of that were pretty basic chord structures. Even though I've been playing in a band for years and years now, last December I decided to challenge myself and take guitar lessons, vocal lessons, and bass lessons. I wanted to try and write songs using the guitar in an unconventional way, to do things differently than I had in the past. I also started painting. I don't really know what I'm doing, but I do know that I am scratching an itch that needs to be scratched. If you make yourself vulnerable and you're willing to really suck at something, the results are often really surprising. You go, "Wow, what was that? Where did that come from?" You end up capturing some weird magic.

For example, I was recently in the studio with someone working on a song and kind of having a hard time and after a while he said, "Why don't you try playing that part like you've only been playing a guitar for a month." It was kind of genius. I stopped thinking about technique and got into the raw, dumb emotion of it and suddenly this big, lush chorus came rushing forward. It was so simple. I guess what I'm saying is that these days I'm constantly trying to find myself not in my comfort zone. That seems to spur some interesting results.

A thing that keeps a lot of people from being creative—or even attempting to learn something new—is the uncomfortableness of being bad at something. People want to skip over that "bad" part, even though that's often the most illuminating parts of the process.

It's 100% true that one of the most exciting things you can do is try something new. It's one of the most exciting things you can do in life. After you've done something thousands of times you become better at it and ideally you get some great joy in doing it. Maybe you're able to get your ideas on paper or canvas or on an album or whatever in a much clearer way after you feel like you've kind of mastered something, but there's also something truly magical about starting something new, about not knowing what the fuck you're doing. I'm always kind of chasing that. I'll be honest with you, I still hear that goddamn critic go, "You don't know what you're doing!" I hear it and I'm like, "Where did you come from?" It's just fear.

You've spoken and written about your experience with addiction. Do you feel like being able to throw yourself into some kind of creative practice was one of the things that ultimately got you through it?

I was thinking about this the other day when I was recording the audiobook for *The Heroin Diaries*, which was such a trip. I'm reading journal entries from when I was newly sober and then reading the actual drug diary entries—it was very emotional for me. I was thinking to myself, back in 1987 I was barely able to make an album and do a tour, neither of which I think I did very gracefully. Now, as a sober person, I can do multiple projects and multi-task and try new stuff and do it pretty gracefully. I can just let go of worrying about the outcome and enjoy the process. When you just focus on playing the guitar all the time you eventually realize that you can actually do a whole lot more than just play the guitar. It feels like a creative life well spent.

For a lot of kids the lure of sex, drugs, and rock and roll is still a powerful, romanticized thing. It becomes this myth that a lot of people get attached to—the brilliant, fucked-up rock star. It becomes aspirational, this idea that getting fucked up helps you become more creative somehow. Your book unpacks that idea. It becomes the opposite of glamorous.

It's 100% true. I understand it. I gave a speech once at a prison. They asked me to come in to one of their NA meetings and talk about heroin. This was about 10 years ago. There was a major outbreak in the prison system with opiates and they wanted someone who had experience with that addiction to come in and give advice and encouragement. I remember getting the stink eye from the guy that brought me in because the first thing I said to them was, "Can I just start off by saying that heroin is amazing?"

So I say that and everyone in the room is like, "Yeah!" And then I follow with, "And then you die." That's the story. It has a beginning and an end and the middle is not very interesting. Then I say, "Or you end up in jail." Everyone's looking at me like, "Fuck you." I'm like, "You're in jail. You're in jail because of drugs." All of these guys were. Then we started talking about the experience of it, the whole, "I just didn't think I could get through my life without it. It made me feel comfortable in my skin," part of it. Then you start talking about things like depression or how your families, friends, and critics have beaten you down and you need something to feel good. Eventually you realize that you have all the power and that the drugs don't actually do anything, they actually don't move you forward. All they do is suspend you in time. No matter what, it's not going to work out for you while you're on drugs. I remember that moment when I was like, "I can do anything I want to do because I'm not strapped down to this belief system that I have to do drugs or drink to be creative." It was really freeing.

Here's a story: After the *Dr. Feelgood* album was out and we had finally gotten done touring after something like 18 months on the road. It was our biggest album. Every arena and stadium was sold out and back then, back when albums sold 10, 15, 20 million copies. The amount of money and everything that came in was just astounding. So eventually it's time to work on a new album with Bob Rock, who calls me up and asks, "What are you gonna rebel against now, Nikki Sixx?" I said, "Even though I live in a 10,000 square foot house, I can still lay my head down in Hell when I need to. I can tap into all those feelings and also be sober." What's important for creative people to understand is that when you remove the thing that's clogging the system you actually have better access to all those feelings. If you're a writer, you can actually tap into what that darkness feels like but you don't have to be fucked up to do it. You just don't have to.

People often make things so much harder for themselves than it needs to be simply because we've been conditioned to think that's how it done. It's the myth of the tortured artist.

So much drama, right? I always say behind every problem is a solution, so if I'm working on a song and I'm like, "Man, this chorus just isn't jumping," the old me would be like, "This fucking chorus sucks. Let's scrap the song. Forget it!" Back in the early '80s, that was my reaction to pretty much everything. Now I'd be like, "Okay, what's missing? There's a lot of great parts here. Let's try to solve this problem." You can do that with a new way of thinking.

There's two things to think about here. We're talking about sobriety and creativity and how they intertwine, but we're also talking about using your creativity as a way to feel fulfilled. I can go to my room and work on art and feel fulfilled. I don't care if you want to knit or tap dance or your side gig is that you're in a death metal band but your real gig is you're a computer analyst—it doesn't matter. You can do whatever you want, it's just about scratching that creative itch. Also, your creativity doesn't need to make you money. If it makes you money eventually, that's a great bonus, but that shouldn't be the fuel for your creative impulse. Make money from your day job, then be creative because it makes you feel good. I always tell people, don't worry about everything making money so much. Worry about how it feels.

That's a nice thing to think about—making things for the sake of simply making things, for the pleasure of it. Nurturing a part of yourself that doesn't have to be tied to financial

gain or about getting attention. It's good to be creative, even if no one besides you ever sees it or hears it.

It has so much to do with that idea of being suspended in time. Things will suspend you. Things will stop you in your tracks. Maybe that's another way of explaining it to people. Things like drugs—or even the voice of our own internal critic—will stop you in your tracks if you let it. Isn't it interesting? We have the power to let it stop us, but we also have the power to not let it stop us. We have the power to undo that. It's all in our head. Everything in our life, it's coming out of this crazy brain of ours...and what are you doing with your brain? Are you training it for something?

We train our bodies, right? You do a lot of stuff for your body, but what about our brain? What are we doing for our brain to keep it moving forward? I always do things that make me have to follow through. I set goals for myself. I create deadlines. I make things with friends who are way better and more talented than I am. I try new things. That's how you improve. Don't worry about being as good as someone else. Just be okay with the journey, man. Don't get stuck. That's all you can do.

Nikki Sixx recommends:

I think *Goodfellas* is a great movie to watch and ask yourself "What would the narration in your life be?" You know in that movie there is this constant voice over narration, where the main character knows he is doing terrible things and just keeps doing them. So what about when you're just going along with your life and you know you're being an asshole? You just know you're doing the wrong thing? What if the narration version of yourself could speak up and say, "I know I'm being an asshole and I know I'm doing the wrong thing, but I couldn't stop myself." I literally think about that movie, sometimes when I'm confronted with stuff like, "Well I have two choices. I can smack this guy upside the head for being an idiot or I can stay on my path and let him get on with his." It's just a funny thing to ask yourself—what would the narration be for this moment in my life? And then try and choose wisely.

Name

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Vocation

Musician, Writer, Photographer



Courtney Sixx

