

September 5, 2018 -

As told to Willa Köerner, 3564 words.

Tags: Art, Film, Music, Beginnings, Failure, Success, Income.



# On learning to grow a cultural space from scratch

Musician and Basilica Hudson Co-Founder Melissa Auf der Maur shares how much commitment and determination it took to transform an industrial-era factory into a sustainable, community-centric cultural venue.

**Can you describe what Basilica Hudson feels like and looks like as a space?**

Well, the central muse is the building. It's an 1880s former forge and foundry of steel railway wheels, which was the initial operation. But there were many, many boom-and-bust operations in the space. The last incarnation was a glue factory through the '80s. It's a factory of steel, concrete, brick, and terracotta tiles, with a classic turret-window hallway at the peak of the building, inspired by old byzantine basilicas. It looks like an ancient church, mixed with an old industrial-era factory.

Behind Basilica is the Hudson River, the Catskill mountains, and a lot of industrial derelict that gives it an abandoned-world feel. It's been left standing while most of these types of buildings have either fallen apart or been knocked down to make new buildings.

We're in a cross section of urban, industrial, and rural, and it all feels like an illustration of American history, in that we can see all that man has done in its attempt to interfere with the surface of the planet. So, both the location and the lost era of industrial failure inform what happens in the building, and inform the always-evolving program that happens here. We're trying to bring a little bit of all of humanity into one cultural gathering place. It evolves with time.



**How did Basilica Hudson get started? What was it like in the beginning?**

We did not move to Hudson, New York to take over 17,000 square feet of industrial decay with no running water, no hook-up to the sewer, and no electric. We did not move here to do that. What happened was this crazy and inspired man had taken over the building in the year 2000, when it was a frozen-in-time glue factory. He saw the potential of it. We met him when we first moved to Hudson from New York City. He was

about 10 years older than us, and had been having these interesting new-agey, sort of Burning-Man events, but had a vision for a community space. He had done a ton of work on the building, and had spent two years emptying it out and gutting it.

When we met him, because we can see the building from our house, we simply offered, "If you ever want to do more things there, we'd be happy to plan some film screenings or some music shows." So we did a few things in the space-Tony [Stone], my husband and Co-Founder, filmed some things there because it's so beautiful, and I used it to rehearse for a tour. The next thing you know, he made us an offer we couldn't refuse, like, "Why don't you guys take this over?" He still owns the mortgage to this day.

I guess he thought we were young enough or something. It was a totally crazy idea, and it's still kind of a blind spot in my mind as to how we actually ended up taking it on. Other than the building was so unbelievably beautiful and we were living a few blocks away. I guess it seemed like destiny calling—that's all I can describe it as, because logically, it didn't fit with any plan that I or Tony ever had.

Luckily, Tony is unbelievable with buildings. We've never had to outsource any contractor. He and his father have been fixing up buildings his entire life, so the only reason that taking over the building made sense is that they could do the work. And I had been on tour for 15 years and knew a lot of people, and totally knew how to lease a space and manage an event. But that's as far as we were thinking, which is kind of insane. It took me five years to realize we didn't actually have a plan.

**For a lot of people, the idea of agreeing to take on a cavernous old industrial building and turn it into a functioning, sustainable creative space might sound crazy. Was it?**

It was crazy. The first year we took it on, I was pregnant. During the entire pregnancy was the building's renovation. 2011 was our first full program year, and River was born in the fall of 2011. Now we're heading towards our 10-year anniversary in 2020. At this point, we're on the other side of a horrendous mountain that we had to climb. For the first five years, it was nothing but blind uphill pain, confusion, and hand-to-mouth existence—because we didn't have a sustainable business plan, or any kind of fiscal plan.

We were very lucky that ticket sales for certain music and film events started quickly supporting the programming—but we weren't making enough to support the infrastructure. So we had to whip up a wedding business and all these other weird random things. As a filmmaker and a musician who were handed this bonkers building to do something with, we had to essentially start from scratch.

So yeah, this is our eighth season, and finally, this is me sitting here with you right before a Godspeed You! Black Emperor show, which never could have happened before. This is a first. I have never, ever not been at a soundcheck before an event, or missed setup, in our entire eight years.

**Well, congratulations on hitting this turning point!**

Thank you. This is the turning point. Getting here was really, really difficult. I mean, it wasn't that the Basilica was difficult, it was that having a baby and having the Basilica at the same time was absolutely crazy. The worst decision. Anyone who has had a child will agree that during those first few years, you're hit over the head. I mean, it's just change. Total, total change, and you're falling through the hands of time, understanding humanity in a way that you never understood it before. The fact that we are growing the Basilica while growing our daughter River, and the vulnerability of both of those collaborations at the same time, was hands down the most vulnerable time I've ever had in my whole life.

I think the vulnerability came from essentially not knowing how to do it at all, and having other people on the other side of it who you must deliver something to. You must deliver mothering. And you also are doing these strange public events, and trying to listen to a place that you live in that has a population of 6,000 diverse people, and trying to not do the wrong thing, and leave anyone out. Meanwhile you have blind spots everywhere.

**What was the first event you organized in the space like? And how has the programming evolved since then?**

When we first started, we needed an event kick-off idea, and landed on Will Oldham doing a reading of the infamous Hudson hero Rudy Wurlitzer's work. He's a screenwriter, author, and just an incredible man... I mean, he's an icon in his own realm, of the Dennis Hopper era. He wrote Two-Lane Blacktop, and his wife Lynn Davis is a legendary photographer who also took care of the Mapplethorpe Estate alongside Patti Smith. They were part of the first wave of the New York City exodus who got bought out of their loft, moved to Hudson, and bought a crazy house.

When we moved here, they were sort of our mentors. They also moved here to make more time and space for their work and lives, and were very supportive of what we were doing. An audiobook version of Rudy Wurlitzer's incredible book *Slow Fade* had just come out, and Will Oldham was reading it, so we just hooked it up. We were like, "Why don't we do our inaugural event with this interesting book reading?" It was a good example of how we could connect film, music, and literature in one event. Since then, every single thing has been like that. A friend has a movie, we'll put up the screen... It was really just a DIY, hand-to-mouth operation with lots of small events that worked out really well. For every one, 200 people would show up.

So yeah, we started with the focus on film and music, because I'm a musician and Tony is a filmmaker. We had no money to run the program—all we had was this cool building. So we just kept bringing filmmakers and

musicians, mostly friends, to do things.

It's not just our friends, though. A good example of how the location, the region, and the community shapes our programming is when I learned about these bonkers Black Friday shopping things that happen in strip malls. With a small rural place like this, I realized that there was an absolute need to celebrate the local and regional makers who are in abundance here. So we created a Farm and Flea market that happens biannually. It was just obvious that we needed to organize something in response to the corporate-America takeover disaster of these small cities.



**So as you got the programming going, how'd you finally get everything to click and line up? How did you manage to make the whole operation sustainable?**

Yeah, now we are clicked in a little bit. Actually, the big click happened when I finally started to understand something about business, about five years in. Before then, I did not do good business for myself. I was very, very hands-off when it came to the business aspects of being a musician. But I've learned the hard way, after coming out on the bottom every single time because I don't like money and I therefore didn't pay attention to it. We had to get very real in that way, and when I understood something about business—namely, that I needed to outsource the work I'm not good at—things started to click in.

**What types of things have you learned to outsource?**

Administration—like paperwork, budgeting, and profit projections. For the first five years, I was doing everything, from production, to PR, to the “budgets” (which actually didn't exist back then). I finally hired an actual person with a Master's in business, who was a friend of a friend. Most people I hang out with are artists who also don't know anything about business. Then one day this lady was hearing me talk about how I felt like I just couldn't keep up with everything, and even while we were growing and having all these incredible successes, I was losing all this potential because I simply couldn't catch it all. I mean, I was one person wearing five hats.

So this woman who is a friend of Tony's parents said, “Oh, clearly this is a symptom of growing faster than your capacity. You need to get a consultant in to restructure your operation.” That was a revelation to me. I didn't know what consultants did, even though one of my best friends was a consultant who would go into different companies and restructure them—I just had no idea what he did. I think I didn't understand because I didn't see that we were running a business. I still thought that we were running an art project.



Shortly after that conversation, that woman introduced me to Sophie Henderson, a freelance consultant for non-profits. One thing led to another, and that was the turning point—meeting Sophie, who actually had spent 25 years running businesses and doing consulting for non-profits, museums, and other cultural things.

So Sophie came to work with us, and Tony and I spent two hours giving her a download of everything we were doing. “This is what we do. This is kind of the budget that we have. These are the sorts of people we bring.” Then one week later, we got a 35-page assessment that was the greatest turning point of my entire career. Like, I became an adult at that moment. This woman had translated our whole situation into a strategic plan—something I never could have done. Like, “Tony and Melissa, blah, blah, blah, started this as a passion project, brought it as far as they can, now they need to become registered as a non-profit, focus on their promotion, and focus on setting and maintaining a budget.”

We initially hired Sophie for a six-month contract, but now she’s been with us for two-and-a-half years. She ended up moving up here. She helped us prioritize everything, and has totally revolutionized the thing. It took her one year to get our 501(c)(3) non-profit status—a process I had spent four years trying to figure out. I knew we needed to become a non-profit—every person I met said, “You’re dealing with the environment, and with historical avant-garde music. Every single thing you do is entirely fundable as a non-profit. Not one thing you’re doing is for-profit. Why aren’t you a non-profit?” But to become a non-profit is insane, because of how the IRS holds you to the highest standards.

So having Sophie’s help getting our non-profit status was really the turning point. Last year was our very first grant cycle. This is why I’m on the other side of the uphill battle. Now we have a thriving weird for-profit wedding thing that basically pays the bills of this crazy building, because it’s so expensive. Then we have a lean-and-mean non-profit arts and culture division, which encompasses all of our programming. We’re a tiny team, trying to do all that we can to serve the mission that we had to submit to the IRS. It’s a full-paragraph mission about how we’re a platform for independent voices, how we’re encouraging a greener future, and really just articulating why we’re doing what we’re doing.

When we finally got our 501(c)(3) status, everything got bright and shiny and amazing. We were like, “We’re fucking off to the races. Now we’re really gonna be able to focus on our mission.” But then a 120-year-old mining company bought the waterfront directly across the street from us, and put in a proposal to make a two-lane truck route that would have 200 huge trucks a day passing right by our building. And, not only that, it would have made Hudson, New York little more than an industrial port.

So, I spent all of last year being an advocate for Hudson’s creative economy to the state of New York. That’s when everything got really nuts and different, because that’s when I realized, “Oh great. I thought it was hard to run a business, but now I see that we have to actually make an impact on how towns are being developed into the future.”

What’s interesting about the city of Hudson is that it’s so small that most of the people on the boards and in the local government are just whoever’s father’s friend, or whoever was serving before, or some random volunteer. That is really hard to navigate, in terms of planning and long-term goals, because nobody is looking long-term, and no one has experience in urban design, urban development, or city planning.

**Despite all the difficulty of working with the town, have you felt like you could get involved and get**

**people to see the value of what you're doing here?**

Yeah, that is what has hooked us to Hudson and to Basilica—we saw there was a manageable scale here. I believe the future of the world lies in small cities and small operations that can be in tune with their local community, and with local issues. In the last 10 years of living in a small city, and in eight years of running an arts-and-culture center, I have found more and more that I can make the most impact by really just working on the three blocks that I live in. So that's pretty much what I do with my day-to-day life. As the national and global shit gets weirder, and more hard to imagine and resolve and fix, the more committed I am to the three blocks that I live in.

But it is hard every day. Hope is something I was born with, and I very much have it in every environment I've been in. With the two bands I was in, there was a lot of addiction, a lot of pain, a lot of death, a lot of darkness. But I am not depressed. I do not know doom. I only know hope, because I believe so much in humans and our ability to be together and to make things better than when they're bad.

I believe in that, and in Basilica Hudson being a space that can bring people together. I'm learning that what we're doing really can make an impact. Anywhere, impact can be made by not taking things away, but by really bringing and creating something. Of course we have to do it mindfully and carefully to make sure that we don't push somebody out of where they live. Of course we're not going to, and we are so tuned into the challenges of this little city. We hope that we make ourselves available and accessible for that reason. I mean, I can't walk up half a block without talking to someone who lives in Hudson, and I'm at all the local meetings. I always try to hear and figure out what our space can do to help.

What's interesting about having a non-profit is you really can't be that political. There's this one law, which is you can't support political candidates, but you can make yourself a platform for other people to speak up. So we're protected a little bit by our mission, which is being a place for human gathering, and expressing opinions. The challenge has been, how do we do really mindful, sustainable, community-building programming while not being outright political activists? This really is the issue. Political activism is one of the most polarizing issues in this country right now. I guess it's like with all the other struggles in this country, and with the rise of all these hateful divisive things—it's our job to wonder, how can we not be a part of that, while also trying to create change? It's very tricky.



**For somebody who is hoping to launch their own thing, or do something that makes positive change but is feeling overwhelmed, what advice do you have for them?**

It's unfortunately just like when people used to ask me that when I was in bands: it's just fucking do it. There's no template. Not doing it is the worst thing you can do, so you just do, and do, and do. If you're not cut out to be doing your own thing, find another group that's doing it and help them. Just do it. I would just urge everyone to try—and the main thing is be realistic of the fact that it's hard, hard, hard work. If you want to make change and plan things that are sustainable, it's hard.

This lifestyle is not for someone who wants to live comfortably. That's why I respect a lot of the people who start their own thing here, whether it's a restaurant or whatever else. They did not come to Hudson, New York to have an easy time. They came to Hudson to work really hard and hope that they could connect with a base of people in whatever field they're interested in. You have to be cut out for that kind of thing, and I think it's just knowing yourself.

But I'd say no matter what, do not be lazy. Do something every day all the time. That's my hope, because we've got a lot of work ahead of us. And, make kids that do the same.

Five Basilica Hudson programs:

Basilica SoundScape is a thoughtfully curated weekend of music, visual art, and literature, co-founded by Auf der Maur, Stone, Brian DeRan, and TCI Editor in Chief Brandon Stosuy in 2012. This year it's co-presented by The Creative Independent and happens from September 14-16, 2018.

Hope on the Hudson brings together innovative voices and revolutionary thinkers to discuss what we need to do as a community to preserve the earth at this crucial moment. It's next happening on October 8, 2018.

Basilica Farm & Flea features a mix of independent farmers, artisans, chefs, designers, vintage collectors and other talents, selling wares alongside locally-sourced, farm-fresh foods. The next one happens November 23-25, 2018.

Pioneering People Basilica Benefit: Courtney Love happens on October 27, and will celebrate the legacy of musician, songwriter, actor, performer, and incomparable cultural force Courtney Love.

24-Hour Drone is an all-encompassing, immersive event featuring musicians and sound artists experimenting with sustained tones, creating a full twenty-four hours of unbroken sound. TCI has contributed a block of artists over the last two years. The next festival happens in 2019.

Name

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Vocation

Musician, Basilica Hudson Director and Co-Founder

Fact



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