

February 21, 2017 - Pablo Martínez founded the Nrmal festival in 2010. It originally took place in Martínez's hometown of Monterrey, but he relocated the festival to Mexico City in 2014. There are currently six people working full-time year-round on it. This conversation took place in front of a small audience in Parque México.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2379 words.

Tags: Music, Beginnings.



Pablo Martínez on starting your own festival

How did you decide to start Nrmal?

I had a void of art and culture in my life. I grew up in Monterrey. It's a really traditional city. The people didn't value the arts there that much. Growing up in Monterrey made me want to go and experience culture around the world.

I did my first show when I was 17 with this band called Nortec Collective. They're electronic artists from Tijuana. They had travelled all around the world, and they'd just come back from Japan, so I asked them, "Where's the coolest place you have played?" They told me, "You got to go to the Sonar festival in Barcelona." I kept that idea in my mind.

When I was able to backpack in Europe, I went to all the festivals I could, and I was inspired by what was going on in Barcelona. It was such a big festival, with artists and people from all around the world coming to experience music.

We've moved Nrmal to Mexico City, but I think doing the festival in Monterrey was something really special. Before that, there wasn't much happening. It wasn't that big at the time, but it was definitely valuable for the scene.

Why did you decide to move it to Mexico City?

When we started the festival, we wanted to make it not just for people from Mexico. We wanted people from all around the world to be able to come to Mexico and experience a music festival—in Mexico. We figured out that if we wanted to keep growing the festival, we were going to have start sacrificing the festival's principles and our music curation. We were going to have problems sacrificing things we really value. In Mexico City we figured we were going to be able to reach more people and keep the festival's values.

What are some of the values?

In general, for Nrmal, it's putting music first in the sense that every decision we make is based on the music, in giving or offering an interesting experience for the crowd. We designed Nrmal thinking about what we like to experience at a festival, all of those details. I think that's a way of transmitting our care of the experience for everyone.

If you could grow Nrmal, but it meant you had to take on a certain sponsor, or this or that, would you pass on it?

I think we have figured out how to navigate with sponsors. If in the future we had investors or whatever, I think we've worked on the festival enough that we know how to make it work. We know how it works, so we wouldn't be afraid of fucking it up. It might have been harder when we first started the festival if we'd taken too much money from sponsors or whatever. It might've felt like the festival wouldn't have happened without them. But now that we're more established, I think it's hard for an outside force to corrupt whatever we're trying to create.

If someone wanted to start a festival from scratch, what tips would you give them?

Start really small. Don't overbook bands. Yeah, my tip would be to start thinking of it as a party between you and your friends or your community or your scene. Make it as natural as possible. Get together with people you know, your friends and people who have the same interests, and make it from the heart. Make it for the music—and be patient.

I remember hearing about things that happened when you were first starting the festival and still figuring things out, like the cots for the campers getting stuck at the border. Did having the experience the first time being that complicated make it feel easier since then? Or did each year you have something that you

had to overcome?

In my mind, I think the hardest year was the first year. Everything was so new. I wouldn't say that every year became easier. It's just that we have more experience and we don't see problems as something bad. We just know that it's part of the work that has to be done.

You talked to me about how you use writing as a tool, and that it's something you'd like to do more of. Can you discuss?

I've found morning journaling very useful to clear my emotions and enhance my creativity. I do the practice daily in a non-judgmental state, where I just write whatever comes to mind.

I combine this practice with a 20-minute meditation. The interesting thing is that during the session and after, I have a shift in perspective towards a problem or idea I've been trying to tackle.

Can you talk more about meditation. How important is this to maintaining the balance for the festival?

It was a big challenge for us moving the festival from Monterrey to Mexico City because we were totally new to the city. We didn't have as many contacts as we have now. For a year we did a festival in both cities. I understood that if I wanted to survive and keep on doing the festival, I had to learn to manage problems in a different way than I was. When the festival period comes by, I double down on my different practices like meditating or I start exercising or doing yoga, just to keep it a bit more calm.

You do have a calm, almost zen demeanor. Do you maintain this calm during the festival or do you ever melt down?

No, not during the festival. For example during the festival, I don't use a radio. Normally people who are producing festivals, they are using a radio and what I do is I just walk around the festival and try to solve problems on my own and try to enjoy all the bands I can. I try to keep it chill. Normally it works.

Does this tie in with your decision not to use social media?

Well, I remember, early on, trying to use a radio, I couldn't focus on important things. I was just hearing whatever was happening around other areas of the festival. So I decided not to use the radio and just focus on the things I could solve with my own hands. Maybe it's a thing about focus.

These days there are so many festivals. What do you think is distinct about Nrmal?

First of all, it's in Mexico. That makes it quite interesting for everyone who wants to attend. I guess the size of the festival also makes it interesting. The bands hang out with the fans. The bands are seeing the shows with the fans. There's no VIP. Also, people value the festival because we make a big effort to have a really, really good line up. During the whole year, we are researching music, we are going to shows. We get invited to other countries. We go to Colombia. I was invited to Norway last year. We try to research what's going on, what's cool, and what fits the Nrmal aesthetic.

How did you first know that you were good at putting on shows?

The first show I put on was the show I mentioned with Nortec Collective. I didn't really know what I was doing. A friend and I emailed these guys. I remember there's a funny story that they just got to the airport and we were supposed to pay them up front. The guys, we were picking them up at the airport and we just told them, "Hey guys, do you know how much you asked for? I don't know, 10,000 pesos? Oh, we just got 5,000, we're sorry," and they were like, "It's okay. We're just gonna have fun." I think I've learned how to do it at this point.

Do you feel like you've settled into a routine or does it still feel like a challenge?

There's always something new to learn about the experience. For example, I was talking to a friend about how I'm now able to take care of creative details that I couldn't focus on much in the years before because I was dealing with production problems, or whatever. I think the interesting thing is you're able to tweak the experience every year in different ways.

Are there any bands that you've tried to get and haven't gotten that you want to book?

Not really. We don't try to force booking a band by paying them a lot. We keep the booking organic in the sense that we try to work with bands that fit the festival—the festival's budget and the festival's calendar. I think if we don't make it work for a band one year, the next year we're able to book them.

Do you ever find yourself wanting to put the festival on in other places too?

That's something we've thought about, doing a festival in other countries. Actually, we did a festival in Costa Rica. It was a fun experience. Because of how the festival is designed, we're able to showcase upcoming bands from the scene of the country where the festival is taking place. It's a combination of international bands with local bands. I think we can make it work in other countries.

Have you ever thought about doing more than one festival in a year?

We did another festival in Baja, California. We did that for four years. A festival called All My Friends. We tried doing that for four years and it worked. But a big part of the festival was finding sponsorships, and then sponsorships fell through. Nrmal had grown and we couldn't keep working on All My Friends, but we have plans to do it again this year.

Earlier, you and I talked about ways to inspire people to take curation into their own hands, to let them know that nobody started out perfect, and that failure is ok.

I do believe it would be interesting to empower more people to discover their tastes and their curiosity. I feel that a lot of people don't trust themselves and need someone else to tell them what's good. We need more independent thinkers that can push things forward and not just follow.

Something that really helped me was seeing every edition of the festival as an experiment and learning from it. So there is never such a thing as failure, it is something more like accumulation of knowledge and experience.

We have a few people here. Does anybody have any questions?

Audience Member 1: I don't have a question, I just think it's great what Nrmal is doing. I don't think people actually realize that what they've done is educate people. I think that's the biggest thing this festival's done, because the rest of the festivals we used to have here in Mexico are very complacent. They are executed by this monopoly that has a lot of tentacles, and Nrmal has been able to find a voice and educate people. Nrmal is a festival that moves you out of this comfort zone. I think that is quite great, Pablo, that you've been able to get people to go there even if they only know a couple of the bands playing. I just want to thank the festival for continuing to do a fucking great job.

P: Thank you, thanks.

Has Nrmal changed the way people listen to music, do you think?

Audience Member 1: Of course, absolutely. People from all over the country buy tickets, which is also incredible—from the north, from Chihuahua. I think the fact that they're also accommodating local bands is important. We have this horrible Latino rock festival that's been happening for 20 years and they haven't been able to create a scene, to listen to whatever's happening. There are things that aren't on their radar. I think yeah, Nrmal has definitely changed the way we get together and listen to these experiences. We have learned to listen to music and be in the space as an experience, not just talking and getting high—which is obviously part of the festival—but it's not just about that. It's about getting this vibe that we haven't been able to do until now.

Audience Member 2: Something she said that's very important is that Nrmal pays attention to what's happening in Latin America. There are a lot of artists who have never come to Mexico or maybe it's their first time or second time. The audiences really appreciate that. We might never have had a chance to see an artist before Nrmal brought them to Mexico. We also get a chance to be exposed to these bands that are actually from Mexico that we might've never seen before. We get to see them right there next to some of our favorite artists. That's something very important.

When you first started the festival, were these any of the reasons you started it, too?

P: Yeah. There were these festivals and concerts happening in Mexico, but we were very used to consuming outside culture. A question I asked myself was, "Why can't we have Mexican bands headlining festivals? Why do we have this tendency to appreciate culture from the outside more than Mexican culture? How can we push Mexican and Latino American artists to have a place to play here?" Also, as a music fan, I started having more fun going to festivals and seeing all the bands play. I wanted to see the opening bands. I wanted to see what new thing was happening more than just going to see the headliners. I wasn't as interested in the more commercial bands that everyone else wanted to see. I found that it was really interesting being able to build your own criteria, instead of just consuming what everyone else was just because someone said it was cool.

Pablo Martínez recommends:

The Art of Learning by Josh Waitzkin

Deep Work by Cal Newport

Growth Hacker Marketing by Ryan Holiday

How to Make One Hell of a Profit and Still Get to Heaven by John F. Demartini

Hackers & Painters by Paul Graham

Name

Pablo Martínez

Vocation

Festival Organizer

Fact

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