

# On the being enthusiastic about your work



Producer and composer John Carroll Kirby discusses patience, luck, and eliminating creative blocks by just sitting down and getting to work.

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As told to J. Bennett, 3140 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#), [Identity](#), [Success](#), [Mentorship](#).

**You've said that you like to make music that's genre-less. Why is that appealing for you?**

I came up as a jazz musician, and I think whatever it was that drew me away from jazz—probably the rigidity, the staunchness, plus my own lack of facility and lack of proper training—I couldn't quite play fast enough or complex enough—forced me to move away from that. But there's still something about jazz that's in my heart. I think by choosing not to directly name it as such, it allows me a lot of freedom when I'm creating. And there's just so many types of music that I love that it's liberating to not feel the pressure to make any one kind.

**You also strive to make music that's accessible. Some people think of jazz as too niche, too elitist or over their heads. You like the form of jazz, but you want to create something that everybody can enjoy.**

That's exactly it. And there have been people in jazz who have been able to do that. Herbie Hancock, one of my biggest influences—he has all the technique, all the chops—but when you listen to his most popular songs, some of them are very, very simple melodies. And so, especially on this last record, there's a few songs on there where I've tried to write a melody with maybe three notes up and down, or something like that.

The thing about jazz musicians sometimes is there's an element of self-martyrdom, where they say, "Well, no one's listening to me, so I'm going to push that further and make music that only my talented friends can understand." In a way, they perpetuate the relationship they have to the average listeners, where they both feel more alienated. As the music gets more complex, the listener draws away more, which makes the musician draw away more, and then, next thing you know, no one's at the gig.

**It's a vicious circle.**

I will add: god bless those people. If that's your path, we need people like that, too. I just like to keep that in check. Who am I doing this for? What's my goal in making this music? I find what's most gratifying to myself is to reach people—especially with instrumental music, which is the more challenging form to hit people with, I find. If you're into free jazz or experimental music, and nobody gets it ever, but that's true to you, that's awesome, too. I'm not trying to slam them. That's important for me to clarify.

**I would imagine there are some challenges in making instrumental music that's intended for public consumption, given that popular culture is geared toward pop and rock and hip-hop—all forms that typically have lyrics. How do you try to overcome that?**

I understand that limitation, so my expectations are pretty well in check, I think. But on the other hand, there's

some been some instrumental hits like Hugh Masekela's "Grazing in the Grass," or Herb Alpert or "Green Onions" [by Booker T. & the M.G.'s]. So, it's not impossible, and I think I just keep my perspective pretty level with that.

Also, I'm lucky enough to collaborate with people who are striving to make big songs, so I get to get a taste of that with them and then use my own personal projects to explore other things. I find that balance in my life to be really good for me. I can work on someone else's project, take my mind off myself, and take the pressure off myself a little bit. Then, I can come back to my project and be able to do whatever I want without approval from somebody else. It's a really good balance.

**What do you see as the pros and cons of collaboration versus working solo? Does it boil down to having creative control versus working within someone else's parameters, or is there more to it than that?**

Yeah, it does boil down to that. It's also just how my career developed. I was a sideman for so many years and got so much out of that. I think I could have easily gone down that path forever and not been miserable. I think there're a number of factors that contributed to me being able to do my solo music more full-time, and one of those—I hate to say it—feels like the algorithm, the Spotify playlist thing. That's not all good stuff, but I feel like that enabled people to listen to my music with an understanding of the other music that surrounds it.

For example, someone might be a fan of Khruangbin, and maybe I get slipped into the same playlist. Not to say we're terribly similar, but in the same orbit. And then, they might be like, "Oh, sick, this is cool. I relate to this in whatever way." Instead of maybe the previous modes, like if my record was in the jazz section at Amoeba: You just don't go in that room. But now, the room is a bit more amorphous. I'm grateful for that, and I think that's allowed me to do my thing.

**Was there a specific moment when you made the transition from sideman to what you're doing today?**

The moment that I remember, and will always be grateful for, is when Solange Knowles called me to come in the studio. I had just had a fiery breakup with a band I was playing with, I was stuck in New York, and I had about \$100 in my bank account. I was supposed to play a gig with this band, and that gig was going to be my ticket back to LA, but I had quit, so I was literally stranded there. Then she called me and said, "Can you come in tomorrow?"

We had never worked together, but I basically said something like, "Okay, but can you just buy my ticket home?" And on that day, we worked on "Cranes in the Sky," which became a big tune and won a Grammy a few years later. I am indebted to her and consider that a big pivotal moment, not so much in my solo career, but as a moment where someone could see me as a producer, which was then the talking point for me releasing solo music.

**From what I can gather, Solange has a unique working process. What did you get out of that experience?**

Gosh, so much. It was a lot of unlearning. Like maybe the note she's singing, in some traditional jazz harmony, is incorrect, but in the context of her music might be completely correct. And she won't work to a click track, for example, which, to an engineer or a producer, they're bummed. That can mean a lot of editing. But it has to be that way, and if it wasn't that way, it just wouldn't have the same feel.

And another thing is, people say a singer has to go inside a vocal booth to cut their vocals. But she was sitting there, speakers blaring, with the cheapest mic you can buy, and that could be the keeper vocal. That was a big influence on me—that there's no right way to do it, and in fact, sometimes the right way is the wrong way.

**I'm a big fan of that philosophy. Can you give another example of unlearning?**

I go back to this quote that my friend Eddie Chacon, a close collaborator of mine, said when he was talking about the work of a certain photographer whose name I can't remember. But Eddie kept calling it "rotten." Eddie was a photographer in between phases of his music career, and he always talked about the flash being rotten, and how it

created these nasty reflections on things. That was something that always stuck with me: It should be a little bit rotten, a little bit broken. Thinking things have to be perfectly in tune is not useful for me.

Which reminds me of another thing that my mentor John Clayton once said. He said, "The fattest, deepest, biggest harmony you could write,"—this is in the context of a big band jazz orchestra—"is unison." Which I thought was interesting because he's got this incredible sense of harmony. But he said, "What makes that so fat is that every instrument, if they're playing the same note at the same time, they're going to be a little bit out of tune with each other, and that's going to actually be fatter than anything you can imagine."

That's why, when you hear a little in-the-box sound on a piece of music software, it's usually going to be very in tune with itself. And ultimately that's what makes things sound more canned.

**John Clayton really helped set you on your path, didn't he?**

Yeah, he did. He was someone I met when I was 13, and he became a family friend. His kids went to the same school as me. He really taught me a lot about work ethic, accountability as a musician, and accountability to yourself—in the sense that there were going to be some shortcuts, and you have to keep yourself accountable to not take those shortcuts.

But I think more than anything, he just upheld an integrity that I always tried to get close to. I don't think I'll ever be like him, but I'm aspiring to get to that integrity. And sometimes I think it's also helpful, like I was just talking about, to throw integrity out the window and maybe do something trash. There's a purpose to all that. But what I got out of him the most was to do my best.

**You have quite a bit of formal music training. Given where you are today, do you feel that was a necessary part of the process?**

There're a few things that I think about here. For one, I am a bit underdeveloped in that I never learned to read music and I never really learned how to play the piano correctly. I'd say I'm maybe 75% of the way there, depending on who you ask. But I think there's a few things about music school [that are positive], even though I wanted to quit a few times. Being around other musicians is probably the best part about it. I've been out of school for almost 20 years now, and guy I know from school is playing bass with me.

We're going on tour in Japan later this month, and we have a deep connection in that way. The environment of music school is also good in that you're there to work on this thing. That being said, I think there's a lot of BS. I think there were a lot of teachers with chips on their shoulders because they were teaching instead of doing it. There's that saying, "Those who can't do, teach." But I wouldn't really encourage anybody one way or the other. I would say that the majority of my learning has been done out of school, but at the same time, it's a good way to build a foundation.

**How did you approach your new record, *Blowout*? Was there something you had in mind when you started writing?**

My process when I write is usually to not necessarily sit down [with a specific goal]. I like to just stay writing. I don't know if you heard the release that Mac DeMarco dropped recently. I wasn't involved on the record, but it's like a nine-hour thing. I call it a release because he's not calling it an album. To him, it's just his hard drive. On there was, I think, aside from all the great ideas, a look into his process, and I would encourage anybody who thinks about writer's block or wants to be composing to check it out. It could be a New Age track one day, it could be a Japanese city-pop inspired track later that afternoon, it could be him plucking around on acoustic guitar, a Jonathan Richman-sounding thing, the next day.

That's similar to my process, I think, in that just writing something is the most useful part to me. Whether it's good or not is almost irrelevant. It's really just the sitting down to do it. That's always been my process. And I think by doing that, you eliminate writer's block because you're always writing, and usually it's better than you think it is. Sometimes you can just write music as an exercise. You can do a study of a chord, a rhythm, a

palette, a sound. Blowout was like most things I do because it fit in that process.

That being said, I was in Costa Rica in a residency at a friend's hotel and was inspired by the things around me—the nature and the people—so I couldn't help but use that. It's certainly not a Caribbean album, but I think some of those elements had to work their way in.

**What about your first solo record, *Travel*? There's a saying that you have your whole life to write your first record, but then less and less time to write each one after that. Did *Travel* feel like a culmination for you when it came out in 2017?**

I'll go back even further because I got a computer late in the game, when I was in my late twenties. Most people had had a computer when they were in high school or something. It wasn't until I had started a gig with a man named Sébastien Tellier and I needed to have a computer to fire off these sounds on tour. So, I was a bit of a late bloomer. And then it took me maybe another three or four years after getting that computer to actually start being somewhat fluid with the music software.

Prior to that, I didn't know how to produce, per se. I would write very slowly. I could write sheet music and give it to somebody, but the problem there is that then you need a studio to record in—or you need resources. So, making music on my own took me a long time to figure out. I would just be making these pieces and sending them to people on email, like, "Hey, I made this. Take a listen." And people would be like, "Hey, Kirby. Sounds nice."

**Who were you sending stuff to at this point?**

Potential collaborators, just homies, or whoever. If I could find someone's email, I would just reach out and send it to them. Eventually I sent something to my friend Chris Taylor, who's in the band Grizzly Bear. We had been working on his solo project together, and he offered to help produce some of those tracks. From there, we founded a new label called Outside Insight. It wasn't so much that those were songs or ideas I had from my childhood, but I had slowly gathered the tools and resources to release it myself. So, it's not so much in the composition aspect but just in the sense of all the pieces coming together, it did indeed take me my whole life up until that point to release that stuff.

**You scored the 2021 animated film *Cryptozoo*. I would think that requires a different approach than a solo album because you're tailoring your music to another piece of art—a visual, in this case. What were the challenges involved there?**

It's interesting that you bring that up because when I started on *Cryptozoo*, I was doing exactly what you said: Tailoring the music to what I saw onscreen. Which, as I thought, is what you're supposed to do. And maybe it is, but in this case, the director, Dash Shaw, a super open-minded guy, said, "Those are all nice, but it sounds too film-score-y." He said, "I want you to make this a solo album." That was a great instruction from him, and it flipped everything. At the end of the day, I think it still sounds like a film score, but I was approaching it like a solo album. That made the process really cool and fun.

**Last but not least: What advice do you have for someone fresh out of music school who aspires to a diverse career like yours?**

Number one, you've got to be patient. It took me 20 years. So, that needs to inform everything you do. If there comes a moment to go with the fast cash opportunity, but not-as-good music, or the good music at low dough, you've got to go with good music—within reason. You don't want to martyr yourself. You still have to eat and pay rent. But you've got to choose good music. I found what that does is make it so, when you're out, you can talk about what you're doing with great enthusiasm. That was something that took me a while to learn because I was doing these side gigs, and I wasn't super proud to be doing these things.

I remember when I was playing with Norah Jones around 2010, and I was living in Brooklyn, and that just wasn't a tough look, you know what I mean? It was just like, "Oh, okay. You got the cushy gig." But I wasn't excited about the music I was making. Now, I'm so proud to have played with Norah Jones, and so grateful for the opportunity.

But at the time, it just didn't feel that cool.

So, what I would say is: Do something you're proud of and enthusiastic about, that will draw like-minded people. I can't stress that enough. I remember meeting musicians who were like, "I don't know, it's just some silly songs I'm playing. You can come to the show if you want." No thanks, you know? I'm not saying you have to be a car salesman, but if you can find a way to be genuinely enthusiastic about what you're doing, you'll attract like-minded people. And most of the people that I meet who are successful on that level, they embody that. I've met very few people towards the top of things who are like, "Oh, I don't know. It's just some stupid music that I make." That attitude gets you nowhere.

**John Carroll Kirby recommends:**

John McGuire - 48 Variations for Two Pianos (album)

The Ayahuasca Visions of Pablo Amaringo (book)

Ahmad Jamal - At the Pershing: But Not For Me (album)

Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure (film) ("It's okay for things to be stupid sometimes")

Anything by Il Guardiano del Faro (composer)

Name

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Vocation

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