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As told to Ruth Saxelby, 2977 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Inspiration, Mental health, Focus.

On taking a break from music as a way to learn

Finnish producer and drummer Sasu Ripatti—better known as Vladislav Delay—on taking an extended break from making music, the joys of fatherhood, hiking as a restorative practice, and why it's totally ok to make something and never actually release it.

What do you do when you're not making music?

Around five years ago, I got a little bit fed up with the music industry situation. I realized, "I'm getting close to 40 and I started making music when I was maybe five years old." I started making a living when I was around 15, and I never did anything else other than music my whole life. I never studied. Then I realized, "Fuck, I never even traveled without music in my life, really." And I have a daughter, and she's now 13, soon 14, so she was 10 at the time. You know, she is growing up, and I really wanted to do something else for a while. It's not that I lost interest in music, but I really got fed up with the external issues in the industry. So, then I started doing something else besides music.

And to answer your question, what I do is read a lot. I hike a lot. That's my passion. I drink coffee and tea. I do music for private reasons. I play drums a lot. I just spend time in the studio without trying to advance my career.

What was your first instrument or experience with making music?

Hitting things. Drums. I have a soft spot for hooks and melodies, but I've never been able to or interested in doing them myself. When I started, I laid out all my mother's pots on the floor and just started going apeshit. My parents bought me a drum set the same year.

I'm fortunate in the sense that both my parents are creative. They're both writers. I mean, there's good and bad sides to it, but they supported me in creative ways early on, and so I never really had to question if it's okay to do what I want to do. It was just always quite clear what I wanted to do with my life.

How did you start making your living from music?

Well, I wanted to become a jazz drummer. That was my number one aim in life. And on the side, I studied lots of drums and percussion. I come from a small town in Finland so it's not too ambitious what you can do here. I just started doing some studio and live shows, whatever I could get just playing with local bands, just to do anything to play and make a living because I didn't have any money and I didn't want to go study anywhere. It was just a stepping stone. But yeah, playing percussion and drums.

You mentioned your daughter. I was wondering if fatherhood made you approach your art and creativity in any different ways?

Yeah, for sure. I guess until I had my daughter, I was quite hedonistic. I did all kinds of stupid stuff and I was very self-centered. I spent my life mainly under quite a heavily sedated state of mind, and just couldn't figure out what I was really doing. Earlier on, I had a little bit of some success and fame, and I could just ride that... And I was never really into any of that, but suddenly I had a chance to make a living. It was just quite hedonistic.

I had to get my shit together in so many words, and I did really. I guess looking back, I didn't really have meaning in my life too much, and maybe it's because I didn't have a very happy childhood. I cannot say I had a good father figure, a model to learn from, and I did not want to repeat what my father did to me, so I had quite high aims or ambitions. Like, just focus on this. If there's one thing I'm going to do properly, it's to be a good model for my daughter, and it's just really been wonderful. I really do take lots of joy from it.

Regarding creativity, people say you don't have time anymore [when you're a parent], but I would say, at least from my side, I am more focused with my time. When she was born, she lived [for the] first two years in Berlin, and I just really had to get out of Berlin. But being here [in Finland] in a surrounding where I feel good, and having that possibility to practice parenthood, it has made me a much better creative person, for sure.

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Does your daughter ever spend time in the studio with you?

Sometimes she comes to play piano, but she used to hang out more here. She's more into literature. She is a writer already.

My wife also makes music [as AGF], so there's just way too much music in the house. It plays all the time. We argue about music all the time, so [my daughter's] kind of like, "This is just boring." I think she was really into Billie Eilish for a while, and she can probably recognize [John] Coltrane in her sleep already, but she's not that into music.

I read that you built your own house and studio in Finland while you were taking a break from music. What was that like as a creative project?

A nightmare. I'm not really a builder. When we first moved here on the island, we came to check it out. We rented a small hut, and pretty soon we decided to move permanently. You cannot really rent houses here, there are not many available. We'd been renting in Berlin for so many years and we decided instead of paying rent, we'd just pay a bank loan, and basically the only option [on the island] was to build.

At that point, I had no idea, and neither interest too, but because of the language-my wife doesn't speak Finnish-I had to take over the whole thing, and so I had to learn. We hired probably 30 people all in all [to build the house]. And, of course, I was building the studio also, and it totally ate me up, because I had to deal with these people and know the lingo, and be somewhat on the same level so they don't completely bullshit me and take advantage of me. So that was a high learning curve, and I had to pick it up really fast.

There's like a million zillion things you have to make a decision about, so I was out of my comfort zone, for sure. And every decision you make raises the costs. After two years [of building], I was in a deep hole with money. I already promised myself I will never ever build anything again.

Is the island you live on in Finland quite populated?

It's a huge island but fewer than a thousand people live here. It's mainly a nature reserve. You are from the UK, so you know a little bit of the European map-it's where Finland and Sweden meet between the Arctic sea, so it's kind of on the end near the Arctic circle.

The release notes of your new album Rakka mention that it was partly inspired by time you spent on the Arctic tundra. Could you tell me about that experience?

I'd been fortunate in the earlier years that I had some success and all the money I earned I spent on studio gear. Around five years ago, when I wanted to take a break [from the music industry], I literally sold everything I could. I sold a lot of gear to allow me to take an extensive break, to not have to do music for a living. So then I started hiking more. I had always also been fishing a little bit, but mainly hiking, and then I really started nerding out. So for the first years, every summer I went hiking for a month alone. And I hiked hundreds of kilometers, not opening my mouth for weeks, and not seeing another person, and no phone. Just pure, hardcore, mad Arctic.

I also go with my wife. For one week, we hike together, and we go also now with my daughter. We've been, I think, for the last three summers. My wife loves it. My daughter, I think she likes it. But I mean, these are priceless things. Where we live is in a way luxury because it's hugely remote and there's no artificial light and no sound and clean air and clean water and all of that, but when you go hike then that's the ultimate luxury. Yeah, it just doesn't compare, really.

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I watched a video interview with you from a couple of years ago where you were saying that touring has become a sport and that everybody's competing to get the bookings. I was wondering if that was something you still felt?

I guess it's just getting worse. The pressure is higher than ever to make money, and most people who go to shows, they want entertainment. You know, they want a good time. I would say lots of artists are having to compromise.

Creatively compromise so they get the gigs?

Yeah. Adapt their music more towards getting bookings. It's a really fucked up situation, I think. I've been doing this long enough, there's so many people I know, and I slowly see them adapting one way or another. Either they stop doing it or they have to start doing things differently.

The young generation, they're savvy, you know. They just go for it. And that makes the older generation like, "Whoa, what's going on? How shall I adapt to it?" Also, when I talk to people, they're like, "Okay, can you make it a bit more rhythmic? Is it club playable? Is it this, or is it that?" The competition is so high, and it's like not many people can afford to just ignore these messages. That's why I'd rather sell all my gear and take off.

What was your set-up to make Rakka? Did you get any new gear or had you kept some?

I didn't get any new pieces. I kept some, but basically-it sounds crazy, I never would have guessed five years ago it would come to this-but I mainly make it in the computer nowadays. I'm using an iPad, you know?

I mean, there's more interesting gear than ever before, and the business is higher than ever for those niche boutique instruments. And everybody has these elaborate modular synth setups, but the music sounds like... It doesn't match up. It doesn't correlate to me. Anyway, this is my weak spot you are pushing, because I have so much love and so much frustration and so much passion and so much emotion. I cannot put it into words which are not doing damage to me when I say them out loud.

This is a bit of an abstract question, but do you make music to process or to search?

I would say process more. Since I was very young, it's been a way for me to deal with everything that's going on, good and bad. When I was younger, I was like a juvenile, like completely out of it. Making music saved my life in a way. I had something I believed in and wanted to focus on instead of going with the crime and really bad stuff. But even nowadays, I take it super fucking seriously-way too serious-but I cannot help it. I don't do it for fun. I don't do it to feel good.

I'm passionate about music as a medium. But when it comes down to it, I really have this massive urge to move things in a way that makes me feel things. I guess there's a huge charge inside me that I want to get out. Since I stopped doing drugs many years ago, I meditate, I do lots of yoga, I hike, but it's still like... I don't know. There's a real load of emotion, but also all kinds of stuff that it's necessary to get out.

I've been fortunate enough that I started early on and my parents never questioned that. Even though my music is super underground and weird, I believe in it. There's something in me that believes in doing exactly what I'm doing. I mean, this is a long, long game. I used to freak out when I did an album I couldn't like, but now just whatever happens happens. I made my peace with it, that it's just part of a process. I guess I believe more and more in creating a body of work that eventually will resonate with me and make sense, hopefully. I believe in progress. I'm open to it.

You performed a lot of the material from the new album at Unsound last year. Is testing music out on the road before you release part of your creative process?

Yeah. For a long, long time I have tried to play music in front of people before I release it. If you're alone in the studio, it's so easy to feel so super fucking smart and like everything is great. You lose perspective just listening to your own stuff on and on. Then when you go in front of people and it's like, reality check. So I try to. That's why I did those shows.

I would say I played maybe 30% of the current album material. I don't know how much I changed the concept of the album after playing those shows. I cannot honestly remember, and I can't remember if I changed the track list. I dropped a few tracks I thought I would include on the album, but it might not come directly from the live experience. It's not so detail oriented. It's more like, how do I feel about this stuff?

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When I was taking the break, I made a huge amount of music that I will not release. I just wanted to make music for my own progress, but also just process things and learn. I've been doing nonstop albums-just do the album, go play live, and do more albums. I wanted to get out of that. I wanted to really just learn a little bit more. And practice, and put some effort in there in that sense. I learned that I really like doing music. There's no money, and I'm not after fame or all that stuff, so there's no reason for me to release music unless I really feel like it.

So I go and play live and feel like, "Okay, do I stand behind this? Is there any reason to let people hear it?" But also I realized after doing lots of music on my own, there are some people who will follow me and like to be challenged. Or if they don't like to be challenged, maybe they hate what I do. It's not a duty or something, but I think every now and then I should put something out.

Yes. It's a release of energy. Music and literature and all creative forms are an attempt to be in dialogue with life, to wrestle with this thing of being alive. That's not something that we can carry around with us the whole time. You need to let some of it out.

Yeah. In a way it was a little bit scary how much I enjoyed just doing stuff on my own and not putting it out, but that's a little bit hedonistic.

How do you know when a track is done?

Well, it's a gut feeling, but often it's difficult to tell what's missing when your gut feeling is not there yet.

When I did *Rakka*, I also was doing several other things, and I probably did two other albums' worth of material at the same time. So it all was just going in parallel, and I had no pressure to finish anything, so I would just let things sit for a while. That's a luxury in a way, that you are not rushing things through.

I mean, the only problem is that when you have this feeling of, "Okay, it's not there yet," sometimes it turns into struggle, but nowadays I don't have a problem dumping tracks. If it doesn't work, fuck it. I never did that before in the past. It used to be a little bit of a principal: *You have to finish it*. But it didn't make it anything better. Maybe there's a reason that not everything is to be finished.

Sasu Ripatti's current favorite yoga postures

Utthita Trikonasana (triangle)

One of the all-time favorite poses - it's one of my favorite places to be for whatever reason, I didn't figure out yet why.

Baddha Trikonasana (bound triangle)

Adding to previous one, everything gets further enhanced.

Mayurasana (peacock)

Only recently got into this. Due to broken bits in my upper body, it's been a long road. For a while it seemed impossible, then one day it came off quite on its own.

Pincha Mayurasana (forearm balance)

One of the most interesting balancing poses out there, something I'm still working on against the wall. It's rather hard starting yoga at later age (I begun around 40), these more advanced poses really point out where you're at, and definitely where you've been in your life.

Hanumanasana (split)

Trying to keep up with my daughter who's doing ballet training...

Name

Sasu Ripatti

Vocation

Musician, producer

Fact

AGF

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