

On valuing your worth as an artist



Producer and Illuminati Hotties bandleader Sarah Tudzin discusses capturing spontaneity in the studio, adding more playfulness to her life, and the magical powers of setting goals.

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As told to Arielle Gordon, 2410 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Production](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Independence](#).

You largely completed your new album, *Let Me Do One More* a couple of years ago, but are just releasing it now. Is it strange revisiting work that you wrote years ago? Do you still find that you relate to the lyrics or the production choices you were making at the time?

When I first was working on [*Let Me Do One More*], I finished as much of it as I could, pretty close to when I had written it. And then there were hang ups with the previous label. I took a hard left turn and made [the next record] *FREE I.H.* very quickly. So I put a bookmark in *Let Me Do One More* and did *Free I.H.*, which came out in the middle of the pandemic. I was just picking away at *Let Me Do One More* once I had finished *FREE I.H.*

So part of it was weird reaching backwards, especially post 2020. It was a little hard to relate to, for a lot of reasons. Production-wise, I just wanted to level everything up. I had been putting so much energy into it as a production that I felt pretty good hearing the stuff I had already been doing, and I was able to take a beat to polish off all of those ideas that were already swimming around in there. So in some ways, it was weird going backwards, and in some ways, it was cool, because I managed to put another record under my belt in between, which taught me so much about performance and about moving quickly and doing things that I really had never done before with Hottie stuff.

As a producer, how do you balance a sense of spontaneity and the happy accidents that make records really great with the desire to meticulously craft every sound?

Oh, I definitely think there's room for both. I think that often when you're trying to meticulously craft a sound, the accidents happen naturally. If you listen to a record and you're like, "Oh my god, I love that guitar tone," often the guitar tone is something you accidentally found, or maybe your guitar pedal is broken and starts doing something crazy. And then you record that. You have these moments of spontaneity, and with the tools that we have at our disposal on the computer, we're also able to take those accidents and make something deliberate with it. Something that has been consistent across Hotties records is accidentally stumbling upon some sound and rearranging it so it feels more intentional.

Do you think there's a specific type of person that gets sucked into the world of engineering? Does it take a specific part of your brain to think that way, as a musician? Or do you think anybody can be trained to kind of do it?

You really have to love it. You have to be obsessive, in a way. There's a tinkering gene that I think exists in

some folks across all disciplines. Sometimes people just aren't interested in that world, and they like to tinker in other ways, whether that's writing songs, or playing their instrument. I think there is something that makes people want to be a producer and obsess over music in that way. It really, more than anything else, takes hours absorbing music and playing around in the musical worlds that you have access to, whether that's your computer, your guitar, your sampler. I find a clear difference when I'm working with other artists—not good or bad, but a difference between an artist who's like, "I write the songs, I don't care what happens on the recording," and other artists who want to know and want to pull apart that session and want to dive into, "How do we make this sound?" Or "How do we get this energy?" But mostly, it's just an obsessive patience that an engineer or a producer needs to have inherently. I think chefs are like that; I think there's a lot of mechanical professions—people who build cars, or architects—who all have that obsessive tinkering in their brain.

How does your creative role shift when you're producing your own work vs. when you're a producer for somebody, like the recent Pom Pom Squad record?

I try to be as hands-on as the band wants me to be. In the case of Pom Pom Squad, Mia is a co-producer on that record. She really put in a lot of hours on her own, just making stuff happen on her computer before we got into the studio with the rest of the band. She does have that overarching creative vision that I think is really helpful in a producer. The role is different in that I have to be a little more diplomatic with bands, because after the session is over, I walk out. I don't really have to live with that album for the rest of my life, so I'm not really making a record that I necessarily want to hear on repeat forever. But the band is going to have to listen to it on repeat, and going to have to play it, and going to have to show it to people and be proud of it. So, I think that I'm taking a lot more consideration for what that artist wants to accomplish, or how they want the performance to come across. I try to take that information and put my own spin on it, or guide it in a way that will be listenable, for lack of a better word.

I'm really stoked about the direction of Hotties in that I feel like I can do whatever I want. And it seems like the people that are interested want to come with me still, which is really exciting. So I can mess around, I can go really deep on something. There's no time restriction and there's no other personnel that I have to take into consideration. If I want to run the producer into the ground, that's just me working crazy hours. I can kind of go down the rabbit hole in a way that the other artists just don't have time or budget or patience for. There's so many circumstances that go into making somebody else's record that it's a little less self-flagellating.

Do you have strategies to prevent burnout when you're working on your own records? How do you know when a song is done if you're working just by yourself?

I'm working on it. I'm trying to figure that out right now. Anytime personal upheaval is happening in my life, my medicine is work. I am really good at compartmentalizing and distracting myself with work and just pouring into something else like that. I'm trying to figure out how to prevent burnout, because it's very real. It certainly affects my own work, and it affects the work I do for other people. Anybody who walks into my studio should have the same respect and treatment, no matter what, no matter their budget, or their timeline or their songs. If they're hiring me to work on something, or they want to write a song with me, that should be just as important as anything else I'm working on. I'm trying to involve more playfulness in my life, whether that be musically or just finding stuff to do out in the world: trying to care less about checking stuff off and more about just kind of experimenting and taking a walk, doing anything like that to get out of the studio and explore other things that I'm interested in.

You started Illuminati Hotties in part to showcase your skills as a producer. Do you think that it's still that, or do you think it's become something different? Did it help you as a producer to release your own independent music?

Yes, and yes. It's like a production playground for me where I can do whatever I want. And I can redo it if I don't like it, and do that over and over again. So yes, it is still a way to go to the ends of what I want to do right now as a producer, or what I'm not allowed to do with other bands as a producer. But also, it's become something completely different, because I really leaned into being a band and I love performing. I loved being on stage and being on tour and making the music come to life in front of an audience. Whereas being a producer,

you're really removed from that interaction in a lot of ways—You make the songs and you put them out, and you celebrate with the artists, but you don't get to go see that reaction as often. Being an artist, and running a band, and running the business of being a band has been really awesome. It's really fun for me, and just a good outlet to be a different part of myself that I don't get to be in everyday life.

What have you learned about the music industry from the unfortunate situation with your last label that you could pass on to people who are looking to sign to an indie label in the future?

Value yourself. When I signed that contract that said "masters in perpetuity," I was just like, "Okay, whatever, I don't really care, I just want this record to come out and it probably won't do anything." But it did. And then they still have dibs on this record. So value yourself and be in charge of your destiny. That situation that sounds unfortunate started to transpire, but it wasn't unfortunate at the end of the day. It sucked, and it was annoying, and it definitely made me have a full crisis about everything going on. But I also was able to spin it and take the reins and empower myself to pivot that situation, and it ended up going really well. I was really proud of the work that Free I.H. did and of the work that I did on *Free I.H.*, and how people have received it. I've also learned that it's important to know how much worth you have as an artist overall and to not be consumed by your circumstances. Understand what's happening, take a beat, and figure out how to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

I noticed that you started your liner notes with a quote from Joan Didion. I was wondering what impact has growing up and growing a career in California specifically had on your art—I assume that's kind of why you chose her work.

Joan Didion is the queen—of California, of thought, of so many things. I really relate a lot to her as an observer of the world. She has this reputation of having a gin and soda on the beach and watching everything revolve, and every person living their own weird world, and it's all informed by this sprawl of the city that she was a part of for so long. I really relate to that. I think that she does such a good job having an opinion and also letting the stories around her speak for themselves. I think a lot of artists from California have a little bit of that DNA in their DNA just by driving up and down these freeways and being in the hot sun all the time. It does something to your brain for sure.

You've said in previous interviews that you could talk about setting goals for a long time. How do you set goals as an artist?

Okay, this is an embarrassing fact. Every year I listen to this speech by this guy, Earl Nightingale. It's unfortunately extremely misogynist, extremely capitalist, and has a weird religion thing going on, just because it was written in the '40s or something, in immediately post-war America. So I don't really want to plug it as something that I live by. But the whole point of this speech is that we are what we think about, and part of the process of thinking about what you want to be is writing it down and making it a physical thing that you can look at and hold and reread.

I've really made that a practice in my life, to make goals and to write down dreams and go as big as my imagination will take me. At the beginning of every year, I make pages-long lists of these values or accomplishments that I want to get to by the end of the year, and then I don't really read it again. And then I just set goals, either at night, before I go to sleep, or on Sunday, before the week starts—I lay out my schedule and say I need to get this done by this time, and it becomes a much more logistics-based thing. But then when I look back at the end of the year on all the stuff that I wrote down, 90% of it is done without me even having looked at it. There's just some kind of magic in thinking about what you want to do and making a physical version of it in some way, and believing in it. It's very naive, and there's a lot of my own privilege as a middle class person walking around the world in Los Angeles that allows me to think like that. But there is something special in just dreaming something up and having the ability to look at it when you feel like you don't believe in your dreams, as corny as that is. There's something about positive thinking and perseverance that has really guided a lot of my life and made it so I am where I am. I get to work on music every single day. And that's because I wrote down, for years and years, that I want to work on music every single day and be able to eat and pay rent and have a dog.

Sarah Tudzin recommends:

Barbarian Days: A Surfing Life by William Finnegan

Reproductive rights for everyone

Brown Cafe at Cafe Cafe (located inside Milpa Grille in Boyle Heights)

Self-compassion

Botanical illustrations

Rick Rubin interviewing Brian Eno on the Broken Record podcast

Name

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Vocation

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