

On creating structures to support your creative life



Producer, artist, and archival storyteller Jocelyn Arem on the joys and challenges of doing interdisciplinary work, the value of exploring creative archives, and the importance of forging connections with people from all walks of life.

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As told to Miriam Garcia, 2190 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Technology](#), [Culture](#), [Inspiration](#), [Collaboration](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Time management](#).

You have an interdisciplinary background. You're a musician, a producer, a multimedia artist, and an activist. We live in a world that tends to focus on the specifics of the work we do, as well as on the specialization of the different skills we have, or on being an expert in a particular topic. Has your interdisciplinary background made it hard to describe what you do, or have you been able to find opportunities with your skillset?

So many creative people struggle with the same question—how do we communicate all the different areas that we are passionate about and connect with people when there are so many things we love to do? Earlier in my career, it was a little bit more difficult because I hadn't yet found people who understood the full experience of what it's like to be an interdisciplinary person. When I moved to New York it was like a playground of people like myself who worked in many different worlds and understood what it was to be creative in different fields and the extraordinary advantage we have to cross-pollinate ideas when you come from different worlds. It was so reassuring to me that I had chosen a career that I had because I found my people. I found my tribe.

How would you describe what your company does?

Arbo Radiko means "tree root" and our passion is bringing together creative people through archival storytelling. What that means is that we have the unique ability to create value for creative organizations, brands, and artists from the archival material that they may have but don't realize the full potential of. And we help to innovate the future of creative work by making new work out of that material.

How do you find clients for this particular kind of need? Most companies work with this strong vision about moving forward, thinking about the future. What your company does is about digging into the past and finding value in it.

Usually by word of mouth from other creative people, from articles, from media attention, or from the outcomes of the projects that we do. It's actually becoming more apparent to people as digital technology has become so immersed in our lives that the content from our histories is always relevant. The more we can tap into it and explore it, the more we learn the deeper truths about ourselves and our creativity.

Some content and archival materials do not age well. Things that might have been approved in the past, today might be racist, misogynist, or considered violent. Have you ever encountered materials that are not relevant or that you cannot use? What do you do when you have a client that wants to use this kind of material?

I've learned it's important to bring diverse voices to the table when reinterpreting the past. In every project, we strive to bring together multicultural collaborative teams that can speak to and make a positive impact in today's context. I'm inspired by curatorial educators like [Miranda Lowe](#) (Natural History Museum: London, Museum Detox) who are working to deconstruct and illuminate the deeper cultural meaning and breathe new creative life into material that might not have been used in that way in the past. So we make all kinds of choices about what material to use, how to use it, and how to approach it in a culturally responsive, educational, activist, accessible and inclusive way.

Besides having your company that focuses on archival material, you're also a musician and a recording artist. How much of your work do you save for the future and how do you organize your library and work? How much of your work is worth saving?

Arbo Radiko actually launched a six-month workshop program to bring creative people together to discuss how best to approach that. My background is in music, but the company has expanded to offer those archival reimagining services to all people in creative fields because there's so much that we can learn from each other. It was much more common in the 1960s, especially in New York city, for creative artists to intermingle. You saw that in the coffee house scene, different performers like comedians, musicians, and poets would be on stage together. Eventually things became a little bit more siloed.

It's so important that as creative people we communicate across disciplines so that we can learn from each other about how best to approach our work, and also the preservation and re-imagining of our work. The workshop will help bring people together to do that. And I'll facilitate that. It's important for people to realize, especially as creative people, that even though sometimes we look outside of ourselves for inspiration, we really have all that we need in our own experience if we just look deeply enough. If we do more self-exploration, we have a lot of value, a lot of gems to bring to the world.

Twice a year you host a community-building dinner series that connects intergenerational multimedia artists across different fields. Most of the time we end up working and hanging with people from similar backgrounds and age groups because it's the easiest thing to do. Why do you think it's important to mix and collaborate with people of different ages? What can be learned and explored from these interactions?

In my experience, when you engage with people from different walks of life, you can learn the most about the world. When you engage outside of your own experience, that is when you grow the most. Especially in the creative fields, we have so much to learn from people who are working in different areas but going through a similar kind of creative process. For example, as a musician, some of my closest creative collaborators have been visual artists and some of my dearest friends are painters and photographers. And when we have conversations about our creative process, although the material and story may be different, the process is very similar. I'm sure a lot of creative artists feel this way.

In my work with archival storytelling, I'm always engaging with people of different ages. I've seen the value of connecting experiences across time. And that's important to me, to create a space where those conversations can happen and we can expedite the learning and the growing and effect change in the creative field today.

How would you describe what a successful company looks like?

I tend to define that in terms of levels of success. In the day-to-day, if you are feeling inspired and if you are working with people who creatively excite you and are working on projects that are meaningful to you, that's a huge success. If you can pay your bills and live comfortably, that's also a huge success. And there are long-term and short-term goals that I see for myself and Arbo Radiko. In the short term, continuing to build and create an impact on a local level is inspiring to me. And in the long term working more internationally and traveling to see the connections of archival storytelling around the world would be a lot of fun.

Is there anything that you wish somebody told you before you started your company, or some advice you would have liked to have known in advance?

No. I've been fortunate to have great mentors along the way who have started their own companies and they're working in this field. One of those is Sam Stephenson, who is an author, a storyteller, and a documentarian. He started a company called Rock Fish Stew and some of the best pieces of advice he ever gave me were just about following the good energy. And I used to have that on a post-it note stuck above my desk. I still think of that advice today because I know in my gut if a decision feels right or wrong, and the more we listen to that, it can really steer us in the right direction.

I also imagine that besides the usual challenges of finding a working space and looking for people to hire, there are other challenges related to the administrative and operational tasks. Did you learn this by yourself or did you have to ask for help?

A lot of it is learning as you go, and then a lot is participating in communities with other people who are going through the same thing. I participated in a creative entrepreneurship program at the Actors Fund, which is an incredible resource for creative people who are starting businesses in NYC. Sometimes it's just having conversations over a cup of coffee with people that can help. Teresa Perez, who started an organization called In Arts, gave me some really great support early on.

So many people would like to be their own bosses. There is certainly so much freedom, but it also comes with a lot of responsibilities. How do you manage to keep yourself healthy in this process?

I have never known any different. This is the only way I know how to live and work and create. I'm not built for a nine-to-five job and I've always known that. Luckily I come from a family of entrepreneurs who supported my desire to be my own boss, so it came very naturally to me. Some days it can be challenging, but I wouldn't trade it for any other way because, for me, the freedom to be your own boss and to be creative is so thrilling and so exciting that I'll take all the challenges. The challenges, in my opinion, help you grow.

You also teach, and your students are currently in high school. How do you prepare for your class and how do you keep your students engaged and interested?

I have some friends with high school-age children and I will pick their brains to find out what's cool and what's interesting to them at the moment. And I'll do some research into who is performing in New York City so that we can engage with artists that are exciting and that they'll have a unique opportunity to meet. So we've had artists like Madame Gandhi and Madison McFerrin join us, Martha Redbone—local Brooklyn artists—and those experiences have been unique and fantastic for the students.

How do you avoid burnout?

The way I've structured my life, my artistry, and my career are all along three tracks that are related. The way I stay connected to the history of my art form and the past is through the archival storytelling, because it keeps me connected to the movements and the people and the artistry of where we come from as creatives. The way I stay engaged with the world today is through my own music and responding creatively to what I see and with other contemporary artists. Finally, the way I stay connected to the future is through my students. Through those three areas I feel my life is enriched. I'm constantly busy and there are always things that are piquing my interest and I can make connections between the three, and in that way I'm never bored. I'm always engaged with interesting people.

It seems that you have a pretty clear idea of where you are, and what keeps you engaged in your art and your surroundings.

The way it all came together for me is when I received an award called the Creative Thought Matters Award and it felt like a lot of pressure. Am I deserving of this award? Have I earned this award and does this award make sense? Because the way I'm creative is so interdisciplinary. I'm not creative in just one field, but creativity is boundless. And I had to really wrap my head around that, and I had to really start to examine the pillars of my career and how they all intersect until it became clear to me. The speech that I gave in that presentation was about freedom and structure, and the freedom we have as creatives.

We can be so free that it can become like a balloon floating up into the sky, but that freedom can overwhelm if you're not rooted and if you don't give yourself structure. And as creative people, we are good at creating. We can create a structure if we choose to. If you give yourself your own structure, you can have both—you can have the freedom and you can have a structure that works. You can create a life like that. The pillars are my way of imposing a structure on all this freedom that I have and making sense of it. If you achieve this, it makes sense, it's clear, and your values and your mission are clear. You can use that as a jumping-off point. If you're not rooted, it's harder to carve out creative work.

Jocelyn Arem Recommends:

Cooking

Iceland

Creative Quest by Questlove

Autumn in NYC

Bohypsian Journal

Name

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Vocation

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Photo by Leslie Kahan