

On the importance of looking back at your progress



Singer-songwriter Courtney Barnett discusses the way sharing work changes your perspective, dealing with self-doubt, and celebrating your wins.

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As told to Mary Retta, 2038 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Success](#), [Failure](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Identity](#).

How did you get into making music?

I became obsessed with music at some point as a child, maybe from watching my brother and his friends play music. My family listened to music and liked music, but they didn't really play instruments. I started learning guitar pretty young and then I got lessons from a really great teacher and he essentially showed me how easy it was to put a few chords together. It kind of blew my mind. And so I feel like I started writing songs when I was kind of young; around 8, 9, 10.

Do you remember the first song you wrote where you thought, "I'm proud of this?"

Yeah, I think I was proud of it actually. It was just kind of a love song and I guess I was just kind of copying what I was hearing. When I turned 18, I started doing open mic nights and started performing my own songs. Around that time, I was like, "Oh, I'm proud of these songs enough to perform them." And then I think in my early 20s, I wrote songs for the first EP that I released. And I think that that's when I found my voice. I think before then I was kind of imitating or copying other songwriters or other music I was listening to. But I feel like in my early 20s, I just found something that felt really comfortable to me.

I've never written a song before, but I imagine you have to think about the lyrics, you have to think about the musicality of it, and then there's just the general idea and theme. Which one usually comes first for you?

The way I've found works the best for me is to almost not think about it. When I think about it too much, it feels really forced or it feels fake or something. So a lot of the times I try to do this kind of free writing, or writing this from this subconscious place or a dream state almost—just to try to tap into the part of my brain that isn't filtering itself. I've really tried to do that on this album. A lot of the time I would find themes afterwards. But it really wasn't intentional. And I guess I find that interesting because I'm trying to tap into a part of my brain that's not thinking.

How do you enter that dream state?

I definitely write down all my dreams. I've kind of been doing that for a while, but I've been trying to be more disciplined about it and study them a bit more and just spend more time thinking and analyzing them. And then in that kind of free writing place, I just kind of have notebooks that I just sit and just write. I try my best to tune out of my brain or sometimes I might pick a theme or pick an idea or whatever, but normally I try to let myself wander off and then I just see where it goes. And often I'll come back to the same place or I'll find myself using some of the same words or phrases, which is interesting in itself to see what kind of continues to

pop up.

It's interesting to hear that you are not thinking about theme as you're writing because while listening to your music over the years, I picked up a lot of themes that carry over across albums: you write about all different types of relationships so beautifully and I appreciate the way that you write about mental health as well. How does that work when you're putting together an album? Do you ever write songs where you decide, "This actually doesn't work with this project?"

There were some songs that I omitted. They were in the pile, in the long list of songs, but some of them were older. I think they just felt less relevant, or they were kind of older songs that I had never finished, so it wasn't so much... I guess that's the subject matter, but maybe it's that they felt like they were from a different time or something. But I don't think that happens very often because I think I really like the idea that an album for me is kind of a document of time, so I feel like it captures this three year period roughly, or whatever it is. And I like seeing all the places that it goes.

Could you talk a bit about your day-to-day when you're in the process of making an album?

I guess it always changes. I think on this album, I was investigating in a way my method and my writing processes and my writing habits or just my artistic habits in general. Normally I like to have a desk wherever I am, and I like to sit and write. And that's normally where I start, like I was saying before, just like pages and pages of nonsense. Honestly, whatever is in my head with no direction or filter. That's almost like my warmup period or something.

When I really felt the album starting, I made a conscious effort to sit at my kitchen table every morning with a notepad and a guitar and try to start one new song idea each day. So that was just a little exercise to exercise that muscle. I always have the best intentions, but I always fall into laziness or procrastination or old habits.

But I think procrastination is good. Instead of beating myself up about it, I try to just say that that is part of it and we need to go and watch a show or go and listen to something or take a walk or whatever it is. I think that there's a healthy way to look at it without beating ourselves up. So that's why I'm trying to allow space for those things.

I'm curious how you refill your creative well-do you read a lot, or listen to a lot of different albums?

I don't listen to much music when I'm working on a project. I think there's maybe a part of my brain that doesn't want to be influenced or hear things and then unconsciously imitate them or something. I find myself watching more films. I've recently been reading more and getting back to a place of enjoying reading. But I think I tend to find a lot of inspiration from film and like television and television sometimes and even reality TV or something, I'm like, "Well, this is psychologically really interesting."

I try to look at everything as a form of study, even if it sounds ridiculous, but I'm trying to learn something or at least empathize with what's going on or just understand it on a deeper level. I think there's always something to learn.

How do you feel like your relationship to making art and music has changed since that has become your job?

I think it's hard to understand why and how, but it's definitely changed and it would be a lie to state otherwise. [The] early songs or early work of any artist-the kind of not knowing if anyone will ever see it or hear it-there is a real kind of innocence and naivety to that, which is pretty beautiful and maybe hard to ever, ever replicate.

I think it's really interesting to see how that evolves as people do start listening or start coming to shows. But also I think just with experience, general life and writing experience, I kind of like the evolution of my writing. I don't hate anything I've done, but I can look back and I can see the progress or the evolution.

It's nice to look at it in a curious way instead of like, "Oh, I wish I didn't write that." Because that's growth. And I've noticed over the years, even how much a song changes from me playing it in my bedroom and making a demo to showing it to one friend. Not even releasing it or playing it to an audience, just like one person, how much it changes the song.

How does it change the song?

I guess this is a thought in progress, but as soon as someone else perceives it, you see it through a different lens. It's like a feeling more than anything, I guess, because obviously it doesn't literally change it. It's like you can feel the projection. It's a messy thought. But it's interesting to see how much it can alter something.

I totally get what you mean. I feel like deciding who the first people are who are going to see something so raw is important. Because even if you say, "I'm not going to take any feedback, it's not going to impact me"—yes, it is.

Yes, of course. And I guess I'm curious what that actually is. If it's our own assumptions about what they're thinking or as soon as you share the thought, you hear it in a different way. I guess it's like therapy. I started therapy around the same time I started writing this album. So I feel like in a way it's a similar thing to saying a thought out loud that you've never said out loud, but you say it for the first time and it puts it in a different perspective as soon as someone else hears it, or even just as soon as you say it out loud.

You were mentioning earlier that you feel like you can track the growth in your songwriting. How do you feel, particularly with this album, your songwriting grew?

This album was interesting because I feel like I had a lot of writer's block on this album and I remember a similar feeling from my second album. For some reason I just kept coming up against all these blocks and a lot of self-doubt. And I think when I started it had been a while since I'd written a song, so it felt like I was starting again. There must be some sort of metaphor in there: I was going through this transitional period in a way in my life, and I was, in a way, starting again.

I was trying to find this honesty. Before, I thought I was being honest in my writing, and maybe I was being as honest as I could. But I feel like I would often have a wall up, or I would cover things with sarcasm or humor or whatever it was.

I guess I was looking at that and just trying to be like, what is honesty and what is vulnerability actually? And what is authenticity? Because those words get thrown around, but I think I'm often like, "Well, what does it actually mean? And how do I know I'm being honest because I'm still presenting an image of myself to people."

Looking to the future, do you have any particular dreams for the rest of your career or next projects or anything?

I'm like a big list maker, so often, over the course of my career, I make little dream lists, which I think is a really fun thing to do because you look back at them sometimes and you're like, "Oh, I did that. I did this little thing that I thought was a total pipe dream." So I definitely would encourage anyone to do that because I think it's a really nice thing to do. But at the moment, I guess I'm so focused on this album and releasing this album, performing this album. And then I think just the hope and the dream is just to keep growing and evolving through my music, through my writing, which sounds so simple, but I think it's kind of a hard thing to do.

Courtney Barnett recommends:

[Stranger Than Paradise](#) by Jim Jarmusch (film)

[McCartney II](#) by Paul McCartney (album)

[Working With Anger](#) by Thubten Chodron (book)

Pluribus (television)

Hiking in nature (no headphones)

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Vocation

Singer-songwriter, mus

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