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As told to Sammy Maine, 2532 words.

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



# On embracing the idea that nothing is ever finished

Singer-songwriter Greta Kline (Frankie Cosmos) discusses shunning the capitalistic idea of a finished product, holding onto the magic of being a teenager, and being careful with the perception of others.

**Is there anything you wish you'd known before you started creating art?**

I think the less you know, the better. Art is maybe the best when you don't know anything going in. I still try to know as little as I can. I like to have pure emotion driving everything.

**Do you think there's a danger of becoming an expert in something that will diminish the curiosity of whatever you're making?**

I don't know if you can be an expert in art and I think that's why it's good to try new things or challenge yourself as an artist.

**What kind of things do you challenge yourself with?**

I think the whole thing is a challenge. The first challenge for me was probably just making anything. And then after that, getting on a stage and since then a lot of the challenge has been about being perceived. I think collaborating is a challenge that has ever-new facets. With this new record, it's the first record in many years where I haven't thought about how it's going to translate live. Let me make stuff that's harder to sing, harder to play, and harder to memorize, but now that I have to play a show, my challenge is trying to learn how to play my own songs. How do we turn them into something that's more fluid? How do we get the muscle memory with it and be able to take it there live?

**A lot of people see Frankie Cosmos as a kind of character. Has that been helpful to you in your discomfort of being perceived on stage?**

A little bit. The hard thing is that it's not a character. That's the part that is painful and challenging, that it's just me and it feels very raw. It makes you see yourself through other people's eyes in a different way. Social media is like that too for everyone, not just for people that are on a stage. I grew up on the cusp of social media—Facebook existed when I was in high school, so I think I got the little bit of that Gen Z thing of wanting to identify as something or wanting to boil down my identity to something that's perceivable through an About Me.

That kind of thing is very damaging to the psyche. So being on stage is weird because then I question who I am to my friends, my family, and even myself. I'm trying to figure out those differences because being on stage is just not normal socializing. The songs are also very personal and very vulnerable all the time, so it's nice to feel like it's Frankie singing them, it's not Greta. I'm not getting on stage and being like, "Hi, I'm Greta and I'm going to read you my diary." That's the part that's nice about having just a band name.

**You have to interact with social media so much as this project. What is your relationship like with digital spaces?**

I'm still figuring it out. I think it's changed a lot in the last couple of years. I feel like everything has become digital spaces in a way that I feel pretty alienated from but I have to do it and I try to just be as earnest as possible. It's really hard to do it and I think it's antithetical to art-making. There's this expectation for artists to do this whole other form of "creating" that's not about our art—it's being an advertiser.

**It turns your art into a brand that you then have to advertise. Do you think that that has altered the way you approach your art?**

I think it's changed the way I think about it once the music's done. This album is the first time that I've chosen the timestamps of the songs that are going to go on TikTok, for example. You have to deliver a 60 second clip and so to make this album and then to be like, "Okay, which 60 seconds is really good for TikTok?" It's just a totally different world. It's weird, it's bizarre, it's dystopian, but it's also fun.

I mean, if you can have a light heart about it, it can be fun. I try not to let it control the actual, literal art-making. I cannot believe that people are able to film themselves creating something and then do a time lapse or whatever. That part, I'm like, "I cannot do that."

**The idea of being watched or perceived counteracts this idea that art-making has to be created in a kind of sacred space, to create something truthful. Do you have to be in a specific space--mental or physical--to explore ideas?**

I think there's two parts of it for me. One is having an idea, which is the easy part. My brain never stops, I wish I could stop having ideas. But the actual turn into a song part is the work part and I go through phases of productivity with that. Sometimes I'll spend a week really focused on making demos and I'll go through all my voice memos and all my notebooks and then there's the turning the scraps into songs, which is just a different mode. I go through phases of doing it really well but then I can go months without doing that part and I become so overwhelmed by these scraps.

**When you look back on the stuff you were making 10 years ago, how would you say your process has developed over the years, if it has at all?**

I go through different waves. There's a song in this new album, *Wayne*, which I wrote in the exact same way that I wrote *Art School* in 2012. I just sat down and played it. That is one way that will come back and will be part of it but then sometimes there's these other ways that are more like doing a puzzle. I've always had different phases or different styles of piecing stuff together.

There's another song on this record that the demo was half the length and my bandmates encouraged me to write another verse and I almost never do that because to me the idea's done, but I wrote a second verse for it. That's a really different mindset than I normally write in because usually I try to follow the idea as opposed to making one up on the spot. I'm trying to hone that skill too because I think that's useful for other parts of the music industry, like songwriting jobs for example. You need to be able to not just be mining your own notebooks and actually do some creative on-your-feet thinking.

**What's been the most nourishing or helpful aspect of working with others, especially the people in your band?**

I've been trying to find a balance between thinking that my demos are complete versus our songs, and feeling also that when I bring something to the band and we expand it, that we're making something new. Sometimes I make a demo that I'm really proud of and it doesn't end up becoming a band song solely because we feel like it's done. I think that is as important to me as for my bandmates to contribute something that really changes a song because it shows that they can see value in the actual core of the thing.

If you listen to the demos side by side with the band songs, it's obviously the same song, but there's so many things you could pick out that are brought from the bandmates and that's something that I appreciate--that they hear the demos and they have a feeling about wanting to contribute something to it. It makes me feel like we're a part of the same thing.

**Do you think directness is the most important aspect of working with others?**

The only time that collaborating is hard is when your ideas don't fit together. If you have an idea at the same time it's hard, but if you take turns contributing to it and building it and listening to each other, it pretty much comes together. There was definitely stuff we disagreed about in arranging but there's also a feeling of believing in each other and realizing when someone's idea is more important than your feeling against it. That's the part that feels like sharing; that it's not just my ideas that are the most important thing in the world and that I have to follow my intuition endlessly.

**How do you know when something's finished? Do you ever wish you could go back and change a piece you previously released?**

I've been thinking about this so much recently because I don't think anything's ever finished. I think the song on the album is a version that's finished, but then I think when you play it live, it's different and every time you play it live it's different. That's the point of live music, right? It's that it's not a recording. So I think all of those are finished versions. I also think the demo's a finished version and the first time you have the idea and you sing it in the shower, that's finished, that's a song. I said to a friend recently, "I feel like I have so many scraps to go through and turn into songs." And he was like, "Who's to say that making those scraps isn't the same thing as making a song?" It made me realize that this idea of art being finished is just capitalism talking. It's like, "I want to make it a consumable product. I want to make it something that I can say is done," but actually it's already done. You're an artist the second you have an idea, you don't have to make it consumable to another person for it to be finished. It's nice to keep finishing it in new ways but I think the idea of it being finished is a spectrum that expands in both directions forever.

**It's like what we were talking about with digital spaces and the About Me sections--having to create these little products of self to be digested by someone else. We are creating art to say something about ourselves, to be mostly for ourselves and if someone else connects with that, then that's great.**

I think it is important for young people who are starting to make art to know that almost nobody is making a living from art, that that is not a marker of success. The fact that an artist like Santigold just had to cancel a tour because it's not affordable, I think it's so great when artists are open about that

stuff. Especially in the world that we're living in now, it's even less sustainable. Three years ago when I was making a living from touring, even then I thought touring wasn't the same thing as art-making. Touring is a job where you're playing live and being home and working on music is the fun part; that's the creative thing. All you can do is just care about art, want to support art, and want to engage with art. That's beautiful. Hold onto that feeling.

**The industry has shifted so much and it continues to shift, but the past three years especially, everyone's talking about how difficult it is. How do you stay excited about your work in this kind of climate?**

I always stay excited about it because to me it's fun and I like it. I truly don't really care if anyone else likes it as much as I do because either way I'm proud of it. I know I'll always be able to do it and of course there's an element of that being a luxury because I don't have to worry about going on tour right now. We're able to not tour because my bandmates have other jobs, I'm living with my parents, we've figured it out but I also feel, even if I end up having a totally different job eventually, I'm always going to make music. Sometimes I even do more music when I'm working a totally different job. I end up appreciating my hours off to get really inspired and having a schedule is useful. I'm going to be fine whether or not anyone likes it because I'm not making it for them. It's so nice when people like it, but I have to admit that I'm not making it for someone else.

**What do you think this project as Frankie Cosmos has taught you about yourself over the 10 years you've been doing it?**

It's given me a chance to experience myself as perceived. I think that's been really interesting. I was always very shy and I was a little sister to a brother where it was very much his show. I was very reserved and I think having a thing, an art thing, that he doesn't do as a young 16-year-old was huge for figuring out who I was in the world. It's continued to be really interesting on a personal level for my identity. It's been scary and also cool to step outside of myself, and see myself from the perspective of other people. I mean, there's an amount of that that you don't want to do too. You don't want to see yourself from other people's eyes so much. But it's definitely given me a place to process a lot of stuff, it really is like a diary for me, and then there's this community element to it that I feel very lucky to have. Not everybody gets to have a band and gets to play and make noise and sound in a room with other people. That is the part that feels really different than anything that you could do when you're 15 alone in your room but I really try and still cosplay as a teenager. I think it's important to hold onto that as much as you can.

#### Greta Kline Recommends:

Silence and time: These can be difficult to find, but are essential for me to making art, writing, or even just being able to hear my own thoughts.

Pen and Paper: Anything works, but I love a felt tip pen and unlined paper. Notebooks are meant to be used, so I recommend getting ones you don't find too precious to fill.

Look alive: Put your phone down and take in every aspect of your surroundings. Pretend you're an alien experiencing earth for the first time: What's interesting? What's strange? This perspective is essential for me!

Be your own babysitter: Treat your art like it was made by a toddler you're babysitting. Look at it with love, give yourself space to be bad or silly, and tell yourself not to give up.

Martha Graham's letter to Agnes De Mille: This piece of writing has been an important reminder for me since I was a teenager, when my dad first showed it to me.

Name

Greta Kline

Vocation

musician

Fact

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