On giving yourself permission

Musician Yea-Ming Chen discusses success, motherhood, and sustaining a creative life.

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As told to Jennifer Lewis, 1901 words.

Tags: Music, Collaboration, Success, Focus, Family.

What advice do you have for people who want to build a life around making art?

My biggest advice is just to keep doing it. Despite anything. Despite any results. You'll be disappointed sometimes, and sometimes you'll be excited. Especially when you're younger, you'll see stars everywhere and get one big show and think, "Oh, this is it—I'm going straight to the top." But when you're older, you realize it goes up and down. You have high points and low points. One moment might be the highest you'll ever be, and then things change again.

So my advice is to be grateful for every moment—every interaction, every chance you get to explore the joy of playing and doing the thing that you love. And also, not letting the disappointments bog you down. I still struggle with that. If a show doesn't go well, or I make a mistake, I can crawl into a hole and not play for a while. But that's pointless. You can grieve about it, but you have to keep going forward, especially if it's something you love to do.

For a lot of us who pursue art, it's not because we thought it would make us famous or bring us a lot of money. It's because it's the thing that makes us feel human. It gives us a sense of purpose. It pushes away loneliness and depression. It's a survival thing. So, if that's the case, then you just have to listen to that. Your body knows what you need to do.

Between your earlier records and the new album you're finishing now, how has your songwriting process shifted?

I just finished working on a new Rumours record called *Residue*. When I started writing it, I felt a little bored with my usual habits. The Rumours has always been my lo-fi, folkier project—my place for the more sensitive songs. Ryli is where I rock out more and collaborate.

With this record I felt somewhat tapped out with the journeys I usually take, so I started experimenting with synthesized drums and beats just to see what would happen. When I get stuck, I like to give myself challenges. I'll say, "Try to write a song that sounds like Mazzy Star," or I'll take a weird drum beat I've never written to before and see what happens. Sometimes the challenge itself opens a door.

When you look back at your albums, do they feel tied to specific emotional or life chapters?

Definitely. For example, *So, Bird*, which was the first Rumours record Dandy Boy put out, was absolutely my pandemic record. You can hear the isolation when you listen to it. I also had a three-month-old baby at the time, so there was this feeling of solitude and identity crisis in the music. I was parenting alone a lot during that time. It was really hard, but there was also something freeing about it. The world got quiet. There were no shows or gigs happening, and that removed a lot of pressure. I grew up being compared to other people constantly, so I always have this voice in my head that turns things into a competition. During the pandemic, that voice

disappeared for a while because nothing was happening. It allowed me to just explore whatever I wanted to.

You said something in another interview that really stayed with me: that you think of yourself more as a songwriter than a musician. I was curious about that distinction.

Honestly, I think of myself more as a songwriter than a musician. I almost feel like being a musician is just the gateway that allows me to be a songwriter. Songwriting is the thing I care about the most. It's where I'm trying to grasp a very specific feeling—jealousy, missing someone, toxicity, whatever it is—and turn it into something. To me, songwriting is basically poetry in music form. My favorite poems capture a small snippet of a feeling or moment but somehow make it feel huge and universal. That's always what I'm striving for.

What do you do when you're creatively stuck? I ask because I've noticed that for me, it's often not a lack of ideas—it's that I've drifted too far into promotion, logistics, or the administrative side of making things.

I'm stuck right now, actually. Usually when I'm stuck, it's because I've forgotten to read. I haven't been reading enough. So, one of my tricks is to go back to reading again. I also journal a lot and listen to a lot of music. When I'm promoting a record or dealing with the PR side of things, that tends to drain the creative energy out of me. Right now, I know that's why I'm stuck—I've been working on the promotional side of the new record instead of doing the things that actually inspire me.

That makes sense to me. Sometimes promoting work on Instagram feels more like playing a strange little video game. What is your relationship with social media as an artist?

It's terrible for me. I have a really distractible ADHD brain, so social media can easily swallow my entire day. I actually use an app that blocks Instagram except for certain windows: a few minutes in the morning, a few minutes at noon, and a little time in the evening. Sometimes I miss those windows, which is actually fine. When you release a record, you're expected to be on social media constantly. Before I set those limits, I'd open Instagram and suddenly ten hours had passed. So now I schedule posts ahead of time and try to keep it contained.

As someone who's been doing this for a long time, I'm curious how you define success now?

For me, success is feeling content. There's the outward version of success—press, good shows, whatever—but those moments are never as good as the feeling of exploring an emotion and turning it into a song. When you manage to capture something inside yourself and make it tangible, that feels incredibly rewarding. I also love practicing. Even though I've said I don't think of myself primarily as a musician, working on my craft and getting better technically makes me feel really happy. Those moments make me feel like I want to go through this life.

What does collaboration give you that working alone doesn't?

Playing with other people is incredible. When you find a group of people you really gel with, the energy becomes bigger than yourself. That's how it feels playing with Ryli. Those guys are incredibly talented, and it pushes me to keep up with them. When you have a great practice or a great show where everyone locks in together, it's almost like an out-of-body experience. It's kind of orgasmic.

You also teach music. How does teaching shape your creative life?

Teaching is actually how I make most of my income. I mostly teach piano to kids between seven and twelve, with a few adult students too. The nice thing about teaching is that it allows me to structure my day, so my mornings are free for creative work. I teach in the afternoons, which means I can spend the earlier part of the day writing or practicing. It also keeps me connected to music in a different way. I'm constantly reminding my students that mistakes aren't the end of the world, and that music is about expression, not perfection. Of course, I still struggle with that myself.

Do you feel like people are seeing and hearing you differently now than when you were younger?

I remember being in my twenties and feeling like people were looking at me more than they were actually listening. It was like, “Oh, it’s a cute Asian girl playing guitar.” That was the vibe I felt from the room sometimes. And I’d be thinking, I’m actually really proud of this song. I worked hard on these words.

Do you feel like that’s changed as you’ve gotten older?

Yes, definitely. I do feel more respected now and more listened to. At the same time, I do think the music industry takes younger women seriously in a certain way—or maybe values them differently. There’s something about youth in music, especially for women, that gets rewarded. That part has always driven me crazy, because I feel like I’m so much better now. I’ve learned so much since I was twenty years old.

So yes, I think younger women are often given more attention by the industry, but in my actual experience, I feel like people are listening to me more now than they were then. When I was younger, I felt more like a novelty. Now I feel like the audience is actually hearing the music, and there’s a relief in that.

Do you feel disciplined in your creative life?

I’m a very scattered person, but I am serious. For a long time, I didn’t like admitting that. There’s this cultural pressure to seem effortless—like you’re naturally talented and everything just flows. But the truth is I work really hard behind the scenes. Sometimes I even hide that from friends or my partner. I’ll go home and practice for hours or work on a song idea and not really talk about it. I like getting better at what I do.

I kept thinking about your album title, *I Can’t Have It All*. A lot of women are taught that wanting too much—career, art, motherhood—is somehow selfish. Do you ever feel that tension yourself?

That’s something I’ve struggled with. When I think about having both Ryli and the Rumours, sometimes I still feel like, “Who said I’m allowed to have this?” Like I’m greedy for wanting two creative outlets while also being a mom. But then I remind myself that for so long I didn’t allow myself to pursue what I wanted because of the way I was raised. I internalized a lot of voices telling me what I wasn’t allowed to do. Now when I look back at the things I missed because of that, I think I deserve to have these things. I’m just catching up!

Yea-Ming Chen recommends:

***Severance* (TV show)**—I’m a science fiction nut, and if you haven’t watched this yet, you are sleeping. Also, the theme song is epic.

A social media blocker app—The specific one I use is called Refocus, but there are tons available. I have my phone set up so that I can get onto Instagram from 9:00–9:30 AM, 12:00–12:30 PM, and 6:00–6:30 PM. It’s enough to get the dirty work done, but it stops me from scrolling until the cows come home.

Beta blockers for performance—They really just maintain a physical state of calm without any awful side effects. The good kind of nerves in your brain still exist to help you stay present and locked in.

Gardens—Gardens are like curated nature. I love being surrounded by plants and trees and flowers and feeling the presence of another person’s thoughtful process in putting the pieces together.

Games with friends—For introverts (or those on the cusp) who want to be around people but get overstimulated by multiple conversations happening at once, games are a perfect solution because everyone is focused on one thing. I think that’s why I like band practice.

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