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June 14, 2021 -

As told to Sophie Kemp, 1276 words.

Tags: Music, Journalism, Podcasts, Spoken Word, Success, Money, Process, Politics, Focus, Collaboration.

On making the most of your time

Spoken word artist, journalist, and musician Lydia Lunch on not wasting your talents or material, owning your output, and focusing on what obsesses you.
Do you remember the first time that you wrote a poem? Or a song?

I remember writing a poem about killing my parents and reading it to my mother. She was not very happy but she always encouraged me nonetheless. I was 12. When I first got to New York I thought I was going to do spoken word, but it didn't really exist then. There was Patti Smith and rock and roll poetry. I would chase Lenny Kaye. He was the only one that wouldn't run away from me and he would listen to my terrible poems. They weren't very good then but he would listen and I thought that was very nice. I wrote about horrible violence, nothing has really changed.

How do you write now?

When I hit the first sentence, it comes out very quickly. So a long piece will probably be three sessions, but I don't edit this stuff. I don't strike until I'm ready to do it. Doing a book is a different process than lyrics. I mean, until I get the first idea, lyrics might take 10 minutes. Why would they take any longer though? Give me a break. But I'm not going to start one sentence if I'm not ready to do it.

I don't have unpublished volumes, but I have busted others, especially women writers. I'm like, "You have volumes of unpublished material under your bed. Oh my god, I'm going to take you to the stage and you have to do some readings, sister." I don't, because I'm not doing shit unless it's going to be applied to something. I don't even doodle that much, I'm not a doodler.

You've been writing and performing for decades. How do you maintain your archive? How do you avoid getting ripped off?

I own everything. Don't ask me how I was so smart at 17. I own every fucking thing. I'm trying to sell everything that I've made. I sold my archives. I'm trying to sell my intellectual property rights because what am I supposed to fucking do with this stuff? Most musicians don't own their publishing. I've never had a hit single, honey, but I got every penny from anything I've ever done.

That's where the fucking money is. Not money for me because none of my records sell, but I fucking own them. So that's what I'm trying to do right now. I sold my archives. If I hadn't sold them when I did, I'd be living in your basement if you have one, because of not being able to tour during Covid. That's how I make my money. I sold my archives to NYU because even though I've been a nomad my entire life, I mean, moving from Making a pentagram across America, I managed to hold onto a lot of, in various places, physical shit, like manuscripts, like photography I took, like posters. What is this fucking shit after 40 fucking years?

What does your visual art practice look like?

I've been taking photos since 1990. I started doing photography, black and white, all different kinds of series. The first series I did was photographing teenagers, but mostly boys in black and white. I'd just show them what their beauty and power was, so they wouldn't be harassed into fucking conforming to the '90s, I'm like "This is you, you see you, see you, see you?"

Then I started doing montages for video projections behind my spoken word and ambient music. Because especially performing in Europe, I wanted to create a Lydian universe. The best way to get across to people is publishing a pamphlet with a translation of lyrics. But then I thought if I'm using visuals and psycho ambient music, it makes sense to apply my photography to that. I started making these war montages, vaguely war montages, and I'm going to stop talking about war because it's never over and it's basically

against any individual woman, all the people, anybody different than a white octogenarian. And these were really beautiful, and I don't even know how I did it and I can't do them anymore, it's like automatic art. Two images. It was automatic art.

You published a cookbook back in 2012. Tell me about your relationship to food and cooking for people?

It's very sexy. It's called *The Need to Feed*. It has intros to every chapter and the chapters are all like: The spicy chapter, this is going to hurt you, 'cause it will. Or there's a chapter called "The killer inside me," and there's one called "Party monster," which is Greek party recipes. One of the reasons I made the book is because I've lived in some of the most polluted places in this country. So you have to fucking sometimes cook. You need to know what you're eating.

The cookbook was an artistic success, and a commercial disaster because it was the biggest company I ever worked with and they did the worst fucking job and then after they didn't know what to do with it, which was so stupid. My fucking memoir *Paradox* is translated into 12 languages including Turkish. They couldn't get one fucking translation. The only translation was one that I got in Czech because they publish everything I do.

I saw an interview that you did for *Virginie Despentes' Punk Porn Feminism*, and you were talking about how you view yourself as more of a journalist over mediums.

I always feel like documenting, whether it's the political insanity or my own insanity, that's what I'm doing, and now I'm just an oral journalist. The good thing is I get to voice my own brutal opinions and then I'm very kind to any guests because, of course, I'm not antagonizing people, I'm paid to do that in my performances. I don't get paid for the podcast so I'm not going to antagonize anybody. My podcast is me telling you about people you don't know about that are fucking cool.

What do you like about doing audio journalism? How does it feel to express yourself through speech in this way?

I like that I don't have to write it down. It's time-consuming enough just figuring out who's next and doing the intros. I love telling people about things they don't know about or talking to people I always wanted to talk to—or just most important is it's a fucking audio museum and there it is and it's on record and, like I said, to expose people to people. I was exposed to shit I didn't know about when I was a teenager, good shit. That's what I'm trying to do is expose people.

I approach my podcast the same way I've produced other people's spoken word records. I've curated spoken word shows for decades. I do writing workshops. "How do you read?" You write. "How do you take it to the stage?" It was very important to me to not only collaborate, which I've always done, but also to promote other people; it just is, I don't need the fucking promotion. I know who I am. Am I still writing spoken word? Well, I'm doing it every week on my podcast, but it's spoken word to the week that just happened. So, my spoken word was always about what was fucking obsessing me the most at that time.

Lydia Lunch Recommends:

Penny Slinger

Singapore Sling

Weasel Walter

Adele Bertei

The Lydian Spin

Hannibal...the series on Netflix...hahahahaha

Name

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Vocation

Spoken word artist, journalist, musician

Fact

Jasmine Hirst

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