

On the benefits of keeping your day job



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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2460 words.

Tags: Music, Focus, Process, Beginnings, Independence, Day jobs.

You're a musician, who records as L'Rain, and you also have a full-time job at MoMA PS.1, largely overseeing their music programming. How do you balance these things?

It's tricky. [Laughs] But, it seems similar to the way that I've always played music, because I grew up studying it. I'm used to having to go to school and then going home and practicing a lot. I guess I'm not super disciplined right now, but I was at one point. I do a lot of writing or thinking on the train or on the way to other places. I tend to work well late at night. It's also trained me to be quicker. I don't have a lot of time to spend, so it becomes a self-editing process, or at least I'm more patient with myself.

Because you're thinking about your creative work when you're going from one place to another, does it help you avoid blocks? It seems like you're preparing yourself, and so when you do sit down, you can immediately get into what you'd been thinking about.

That's definitely how I feel. I almost feel like I'm always writing music. I guess it's less like I feel limited; it's more like I'm always thinking about it, and always writing it and recording and thinking through things. It's nice because it becomes less of a sacred thing. It becomes a part of my everyday life.

You've recorded with bands in a collaborative setting. L'Rain is a solo project, though you worked with other people on it. How is it different psychologically when something's thought of as a "solo" project versus a band effort?

It feels very different. I don't really like being a boss. [Laughs] But, it kind of feels like I'm a boss in some ways. It makes me a little nervous, and you know, I'm just very careful in the ways that I try to approach other musicians. A lot of the musicians I work with have their own solo practices that I also helped them with. So, I'm very sensitive to that. I also try to give people some freedom to put a little bit of themselves into the project.

I can be stubborn sometimes, and I have a pretty strong sense of what I like and don't like, and what I respond to and don't. So, I'm trying to be less stubborn. [Laughs] I've found that it's been good to be open to other things I wouldn't have necessarily thought would be a good idea at first. In this project, it mostly came from me and my ideas, but I'm hoping future projects will be a little bit more collaborative.

I've worked with this project's drummer [Alex Goldberg] in a lot of other contexts. We wrote a lot of the drum parts together. We'd talk about it and be super collaborative, which made it feel a little less like I was a boss imposing my will on other people, which, like I said, is not easy or comfortable for me.

How do you know when you've found the right collaborator?

A gut feeling. I feel like I trust my instincts a lot, and I can kind of tell within the first couple of minutes if something is right. I've also found that if something is easy, then it's right. The path of least resistance is the right one. Oftentimes, I would get signs. Like, I'll run into someone a lot, or we're playing the same bills a lot. In that way, it's outside of me. It just kind of happens.

Because the project involves you processing the loss of your mother, Lorraine, I imagine it was hard taking other people's ideas into consideration.

Yeah. That is true. It was about my mom, but it was also about a lot of other things, just because half of it was written before she was ever even sick. So, in that way, I guess it is kind of collaborative, because a lot of the album is also about my friends and my relationships. That's all in there and, you know, as I was working on it, the people that it was about knew that I was writing it about them. [Laughs]

You wrote a part of it before your mother had passed, when she did die, did you go back and rework things, or were you able to maintain the material you'd already made and make it cohesive in some other way?

That's the weird part—it already felt cohesive, and I'd already been thinking about grief in a more general sense of projects ending, friendships ending, lots of other things. So, when my mom did pass, it sort of... That was the most jarring part for me; what I was working on beginning to make sense already. That was really sort of shocking and that made the project have a lot more weight.



"Which Fork / I'll Be" from L'Rain.

The songs have so many layers to them. When you're working on a track, how do you know when it's done? The music you write has a lot to it; I can imagine being tempted to add to it endlessly.

Sometimes when I listen to it, I'm still editing it in my head a little bit. At a point, you need to realize that you have to stop and be outside of yourself. You want to take it seriously, but you also know in your heart that you're making it worse by over-editing or over-processing or over-adding.

It's also the producer [Andrew Lappin] that I was working with on it. I know him super well. Everything I've ever made, I've made with him, and he knows when to tell me to stop. [laughs].

When something's done, what makes you think of it as successful?

I'm generally extremely critical of myself. I don't think I'll ever think anything I do is a success. [laughs] But I'm trying to get better at evaluating what it is that I'm doing and being able to put it into the proper context. So, thinking less in terms of success, and more in terms of actually evaluating things for what they are. That's all I can hope for right now.

To make the record you pulled some things off your SoundCloud and pieced them together. You've said you saw some things as fragments and developed those. If you have a fragment that you're trying to work into something larger and it doesn't work, do you have trouble abandoning it?

That's always hard. I always have trouble abandoning things. I'm a little bit of a pack rat. I have hundreds of little recordings that I save and am constantly going back to—from high school even. If something doesn't work, I'm okay to put it in the pile of stuff that I can go back to, because I know it's there and I can always refer to it at another point. But, the parts that make the most sense together just sort of merge. It just happens. If it works quickly, then it means it was meant to work, and if it doesn't, then you've gotta scrap it for now.

Do you ever sit down and start a song from nothing, or is your process more about piecing together these other parts that you've made in the past?

I think it's both. Some songs write themselves in two seconds. I don't really have an in between. It's either a song gets written right as I sit down, or I'm piecing things together from many different years of my life.

I remember hearing Jay Reatard for the first time. I thought it was so cool how he would have a billion different versions of the same song. He was really great about being public about his editing process. I always really admired that about him and thought about it. I always wanted to have the courage to do something like that. I think about that a lot.

You play a number of instruments on the album. Has it been complicated to figure out how to do it in a live setting? That seems like an entire process in and of itself—learning how to make the songs in real life.

I haven't really made an album in this way before. I'm used to playing songs for a while with other people before going in to record them, and so I already have an idea of how it worked live. This is the backwards process. It was really complicated. I did want to make sure that I could be a little bit modular with my approach. So I tried to make sure that I

could do as much as I could by myself and add people on as they're available or as necessary. That felt true to the process of recording the album, too. I have a little bit of a solo setup, but lately I've been playing as a quartet.





"Heavy (But Not in Wait)" from L'Rain.

Would you want to do another record this way, or do you imagine, when you move forward, it will become more of a band project?

I'm so used to this new approach at this point. I've been thinking about all these fragments of things. I have such an idiosyncratic way of working on new songs, and I'm always writing them. At this point, it's hard to write with other people, but I'd love to at some point. I've started writing some new stuff I'm now working on.

Do you have a plan for the next release then? The music industry's cycle is pretty regimented—"The album's done, now I need to tour, now I need to get this next thing done," etc. Do find yourself on that path or does having a day job afford you the time to make music at your own pace and release it when you want to release it?

At this point, I have no plan, which I feel kind of guilty about sometimes, but it's also freeing. I had zero expectations for what would happen with this music and the things I was making. I just wanted to make them. That was pretty much the end of it. It's nice to be able to be responsive to whatever's happening. I can make music as I want, I can play some shows if I want. It would be nice to get to a point where it's a little bit more organized, but that also takes a lot more discipline. I don't know if I have that right now.

Because you're on your own schedule, how did you decide it was time to get going on this last record?

It's probably Andrew, the producer I was working with. He knows me very well, and he knows that I procrastinate a lot. He was eager for me to finally start working on things. He'd been bugging me to do it, in a good way. Because it wouldn't have happened without him gently nudging me.

Do you have any specific needs for a recording or rehearsal space to keep you focused?

I feel like I can only write when it's really comfortable. I write a lot of stuff in my bed. I do have this rehearsal space in my basement that I share with other people. When I'm working during the day, people are actually in my basement rehearsing. Because I've been sharing this rehearsal space, it's actually made me a little bit more disciplined, because I know that other people are using it at other times, and that I really need to think about the times that I'm rehearsing with my band and dedicating time to my music. That's been different for me.

At PSI you work with musicians. Sometimes do you think "I'd rather be working on my own stuff than helping you get your thing together"? Do you learn things through working with them? How does your day job fit into your artistic work?

I learn so much all the time. I feel like it makes me a way more empathetic worker-to also be a musician. I feel like sometimes musicians are also doing all that sort of administrative work anyway. That's what it's like if you're working DIY scenes—you're creating your own shows, you're producing your own shows, and you're doing all this stuff. That's the world that I'm used to, so, in a lot of ways, it just feels natural.

I love being able to help other musicians get their shows together and their stuff off the ground. Plus, when I was freelancing and more pressed for finding work, I was definitely playing less and writing less music.

Would you ever want to do music full time, or is it important for you to have the play between the two different worlds to create what you do?

It would feel weird to not have this full-time job. I've been organizing shows for so long. It's a big part of it for me, and I really enjoy working with other artists and helping them achieve their vision. That gives me so much joy. It feels like two sides to the same coin, really.

Do you think it's still a viable thing for people to say, "I'm going to do music full time?" From your personal experience and experiences booking bands, does it seem like a bad idea, or do you think there's opportunity out there?

There's this romantic feeling that being a full-time artist is the goal, but that doesn't have to be the goal, or shouldn't be necessarily. There are so many artists that are super successful that also diversify the sorts of projects they work on. It's not shameful to be a working artist or to have other interests that you're also pursuing in tandem with making music. It's easy for people to think that because you're working a job and you're also making creative work that you're somehow not doing it, and that's just not true.

Taja Cheek recommends five sounds:

Water running through pipes in my apartment (Makes me feel like I'm breathing underwater)

My mother's bracelets clanging together (She never took these off—they sound like bells!)

Muffled organ and singing on Sunday mornings (I am surrounded on all sides by churches)

Police sirens (Constant: a synesthetic red and blue sound)

The fizz of a seltzer bottle opening (What else is there to drink?)

Name

Taja Cheek

Vocation

Musician, Curator



Photo by June Canedo