

On building a career through word of mouth



Musician Lætitia Tamko (aka Vagabon) discusses the specifics behind how she built a following, her transition from amateur to professional musician, and why it's important never to shove your work down people's throats.

February 7, 2023 - Lætitia Tamko is a multi-instrumentalist and producer, recording as [Vagabon](#) since 2014. Her debut record [Infinite Worlds](#) was released earlier this year. Here Tamko discusses the specifics behind how she built a following, her transition from amateur to professional musician, and why it's important never to shove your work down people's throats.

As told to Charlotte Zoller, 2065 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Independence](#), [Focus](#), [Adversity](#), [Inspiration](#), [Success](#).

How did you build an early following?

I put out demos on Bandcamp, and I knew no one in the DIY community at all. I played one show at [Silent Barn](#), and people kept telling others about it. It was all very slow; I just played. It's cool and a testament to the music community [in Brooklyn]. Because that's an important part of how I started making music, how I started being confident in music, and how I started touring. These spaces were important for that.

There was a time when I was playing at Silent Barn like every weekend. I was touring before anyone knew me. When you're starting out, no one's going to go to your show because they know you. They're going just to stumble upon something. So I toured that EP of demos for two years, DIY touring. No one knew who I was.

That's always been my thing. I'm just gonna go get it. I'm not going to wait for it to come to me. I wasn't going to wait until my album came out and I got a booking agent to go on tour. Now that I have a booking agent and I go on tour, the tours are structured so differently. I roughed it. I'm still roughing it. I know how to rough it. Versus putting something out and then being thrust into a hotel every night with buyouts. Like, that's not normal. Or that's not how a lot of people tour in our community. So, I'm so grateful that I have that perspective.

You know what you want now, what's important to you.

Exactly. It was touring a lot that did it. There is a music community like ours in almost every state in the country. It's just about getting there and playing with people that you like. Just talking to people. Asking them to go on tour together. Asking them to play together.

Touring, I think, is how people started finding out about me. I'm glad that it was organic like that, where someone told someone... It was a slow burn. And it's still slowly burning. I don't feel like I'm huge or anything, but I'm making steps. More people are paying attention. I think a lot of people who are familiar with those EPs, they understand I just kind of toured and they happened to find it.

I remember the first time anyone in the music world, in music writing, ever found my music. It was [Lars Gotrich from NPR](#); he tweeted about my EP randomly. This was so long ago! Then the guy from [Galaxie 500](#) chimed in. He said he liked it. I was like, "What is happening?" So excited. Lars found out about it through [the writer] [Maria Sherman](#) who tweeted about it who happened to see me play an apartment to like 11 people with [Mitski](#).

It blew my mind that a lot of this is just based on recommendation. It got to Lars, then Lars got interested in it, and showed it to other people. He works in music and people trust his taste. So the word of mouth thing—just getting in front of people—is how I think people started following the project. I'm not a fan of shoving things down people's throats... especially something as subjective as art. Some people may love it, some people may not. There are just so many factors.

Do you have a day job now?

No.

Do you consider yourself a professional musician? If so, how and when did you make that change?

I consider myself a musician and it's really exciting to say that. I made the transition not as long ago as you might think. I left my engineering job this March. I was like grinding as fuck.

While making *Infinite Worlds*, I was a double major in engineering school, had a full time engineering job, and recording that album every day. It felt like it was going to amount to something. It felt like hard work, but it didn't feel like it was going to be like that forever. Just the way that I am and the circumstances I was brought up in, I'm really not a stranger to working my ass off. Being a musician is a hard job. People don't think about it as being a hard job. But it's also one of the chilliest times that I've had.

I've been working and going to school consistently since I was 15 years old. So, to be in a place where I have one job and it's something that I love... it's unreal to me. I'm not going back; I'm not gonna do it. I don't ever feel guilt for my success. I don't feel survivor's guilt. I worked to get here and I have to work to stay here. It's not over, you know what I mean?

It's important to me to be able to be like, "I'm a full time musician, and before this I did a lot of fucking shit." It's wild. I feel like you just have to do the work. The things that you wanna do, you manifest them. You don't demand it from people. You go and you get it—or you at least try.

Like, let's say you have an album that you think is really great but you think no one will listen to it. You're afraid that it won't get into the right ears or that no one will care. That is a very legitimate artistic fear. But also if you want to be a touring musician, even if you don't have all the pieces together, there are ways to do it... on your own, just roughing it. There are so many musicians I know who have gone to music school, super trained in jazz, in composition, just geniuses in the craft itself, but fail to understand the nuances to being a musician. It doesn't stop and start with technical ability. You can be Beyoncé's bass player one day. You can have it in you, but how do you get to a place where Beyoncé's crew even notices you?

You just have to be out here. Have to be out here; you have to grind. Take the gigs, go on the tours, sleep on the floors. People really talk. You do your work, you show it, and by showing it you give people the option of saying yes or no. Just by showing it is bringing you closer. That's what I mean by manifesting it rather than demanding it from people and being like, "Why am I not getting this thing that this other person's doing?" Everyone has a different path, you know?

Sometimes the path to becoming a "successful" musician can feel like a tightly held secret.

It seems like, "How do you do this?" It does feel like a secret. The booking agent game feels like a secret. I understand the musicians who would like to make the transition or who would like to do things more professionally, but they just can't understand it. I get it; it's really ominous how all of this works. It's important to talk about it. It's not like sharing that knowledge with others is gonna stop your success. Everyone feels like if you share it then you're gonna have less shows. Also, that's just bad karma. That's just bad. Just share it. Why not?

What do you consider to be the most valuable resource for the work you do?

I think my friends and other musicians are the most valuable resources because I don't have bandmates or a manager. I'm the sole entity, and it's kind of a choice. Having access to other musicians who are friends of mine is my best resource. That goes for both while I'm making music and sending demos to a handful of friends or when I'm thinking about, "Should I get a tour manager for this?" or, "How much merch should I order?" I think my community of friends who are also artists is my best resource.

What's important when looking for a label to release your music?

For me, it's important that the label I'm on really gets the music. People do a really good job when they believe in the thing they're working on. I know not everyone is in a position to say no to advance money or whatever, so it sounds simpler than it actually is. But for instance, if there's a small label that really believes in what you're doing and then there's a big label that will give a lot of money but you'll get lost in the sauce of their whole thing, do your thing and go with the people that really care about what you're doing. That means more in the long run.

Independent music is really important and really works. Maybe that's like, "Duh!" to everyone else, but for me there are things about this that are really special. Especially to someone who before being a musician thought of the music industry in very much a Top 40 kind of way. Like, can we talk? Princess Nokia doesn't have a record deal! Chance the Rapper doesn't have a record deal!

For musicians who are getting started and feel like it can't work if they don't have a huge label backing them or like 30k or something, you know, it can work. Pool your resources together and get it done. When that label does approach you, the leverage you're gonna have because you've been working is gonna be far more than you coming to a label asking for \$30,000 dollars for your first record. Build that up first so you can have your choosing of where to go.

How did you decide to hire a booking agent and a publicist? What was the process of how you know when, who to pick, what's the right fit?

I'm someone who likes to research anything that I do, even if it's like buying a new mango I've never bought before. I have to do my research. So that's kind of the same thing with the people that are on my team now. For instance, [my publicist] is not abrasive. I don't want to shove anything down anyone's throats. That's not my style. I want to open a door for people to be made aware of what I do, but I don't want to push it. He's not pushy either, so I knew he would handle [my press] in ways that I would find respectable. I've know that because I did so much asking around and really getting to know what I'm getting into.

Who'd you ask?

Other bands, other label people... music media people, too—because those are the people that are interacting with the publicist. I'm sure writers' inboxes are constantly full. So if you have a publicist that's respected and isn't an asshole, people will open their email. That's what I was looking for. I think I'm still figuring out these different parts of my career.

Do you think you'll ever hire a manager?

If I find the right person. I think I'm close to it, and that's exciting. It's gotten too much for me personally, and I don't want anything to suffer because I'm a human. You know what I mean? When I get home from tour, I usually decompress for at least a week, which means I'm off limits. I'm totally not against managers at all. It's all just about being patient enough find the right thing and then stick with it.

Vagabon recommends:

Don't really fuck with cereal but... Corn Flakes (exclusively served with warm non-dairy milk)

"For Lovers and Fighters," an essay by Dean Spade. The main topic is polyamory and its ideas are pretty radical (so it isn't for everyone) but there are many takeaways here such as identifying and starting to unlearn dependency, jealousy, possessiveness, and ego. I read it every few months to remind myself of those things.

Journey in Satchidananda by Alice Coltrane

I'm your protector now EP by Nadia

"Bodak Yellow" music video by Cardi B

Name

Letitia Tamko

Vocation

Musician

Fact

Letitia Tamko is a multi-instrumentalist and producer, recording as Vagabon since 2014. Her debut record *Infinite Worlds* was released earlier this year. Here Tamko discusses the specifics behind how she built a following, her transition from amateur to professional musician, and why it's important never to shove your work down people's throats.



photo by Ebru Yildiz