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As told to Max Freedman, 2989 words.

Tags: Writing, Beginnings, First attempts, Identity, Independence, Mental health, Money.

On not being afraid to get messy in your creative work

Writer Laura Studarus on setting your own title for the type of creative work you do, asking and answering questions, and finding creative opportunities that check every box.

I don't think everyone understands how insane the logistics behind travel planning are, especially as a journalist. Can you talk about that and how it ties in with your creative process?

I feel like, sometimes, I'm throwing darts at a map and hoping something hits. It's a combination of, what's interesting to me, where can I logistically be, and how can I do it in the cheapest, most effective way possible? Is that me buying a plane ticket and funding my own travel? Is that cooperation with a location or publication?

A friend I was talking to recently said you'd have to almost use Oblique Strategies to figure out what I do at any given time, and I cried laughing because that's what I feel like I'm doing. I might as well pull a card from Brian Eno's deck while planning my travel. It's taught me that I'm not a super relaxed person and I err on the anxious side. I'm working on that, but it has taught me that at some point, you just need to let what's going to happen, happen.

How do you arrange all your travel and be constantly on the go without burning out or losing the passion for what you love?

I have to set very strong boundaries, and that's something I'm only realizing as I get older. I have to stay in some nights. I have said no to projects that have broken my heart, and sometimes, I come around again, but ultimately the more I prioritize mental health and physical wellbeing, the easier it is to work and to find joy in adventures. But I'm still learning to say no.

I got into this because I have a bucket list. When a job comes up and you're like, "This ticks every single box except that mental health box," oh boy, it's hard.

I really feel that, as somebody who has a full-time job and freelances on the side. When freelance things come up, I have to decide: Am I overextending myself, or is this worth it?

Yeah, and you're probably very similar to me. You probably have that Venn diagram, and you're looking for all the jobs in the middle of: Does this feed my sense of community? Does this help pay the bills? Does this check something off on my personal list? When it hits all those in the middle, this is something I've got to consider.

A lot of the things you're bringing up are why I desperately want an intern. I love the idea of mentoring the future of journalism and having them ask me these questions, because the people who did this for me—if they'd told me that 10 years down the line I'd be turning down bucket list trips or interviews because the pay wasn't great or I need to sleep or something else came up, I'm not sure I would've believed them. But I love that I have mentors' voices in my head, and I would love to do that for someone else.

What would having an intern look like, and how would it benefit your creative process?

It would take a lot of brainstorming, and honestly, getting an intern is something I don't necessarily need to positively impact my creative process. I do genuinely want to give back, and it's a two-way street. If I can teach an intern something, great. If they can teach me things, even better.

Since you're always shifting locations, I'm curious what a space needs to have in it for you to feel at home with your process.

The more I do this, the more I realize that, at a certain point, space can have only so much to do with it. If you can get me a WiFi connection and my laptop has batteries, we're good to go.

A friend was asking me about this—what do you need to get in the flow? I couldn't answer that, because at home, when I'm working, sometimes it can take eight hours for me to write an article, but when I'm on the road, I did a full-on interview-to-article in three hours the other day. I think that comes back to taking care of myself. The more I take care of myself, the more my brain can work and the less external things press on me.

It sounds like the traveling and the work you do is your self-care.

I definitely have the kind of brain—I love being overstimulated until I realize that gets me into trouble. That's why I write about so many different things. I started out this job being a music writer, then I switched into travel, and then I expanded into lifestyle. Now, when people ask me what I write, I usually just say I'm a writer, period, end of sentence. Having a flow of ideas, stimulation, places, and people really helps.

When I first met you, you were indeed solely a music journalist, but now, you're what I think of as a travel journalist, though you've rightly identified that you're also a lifestyle journalist. How did you know it was time to make the switch, and how did you go about it?

Before you met me, I was a script reader, which is a bizarre job that only exists in Hollywood and doesn't pay nearly enough. With each phase along the way, I was kind of tripping and falling face-first. I lost my script-reading job when the production house I was working for closed. I thought, "I'm going to work really hard at journalism until I find a real job." And that didn't happen. But music [journalism] kept opening up more doors and allowing me to step through them. It ties back to the internship question. *Under the Radar* was instrumental because they were willing to let me sit with them two, three days a week and ask all my questions.

For my switch from music into travel, I started realizing I was being sent to international music festivals, which is the coolest thing ever. I also realized I loved the travel aspect, and at the same time, the music window was starting to close—outlets were shuttering, wages were going down—and I thought, "Well, this can be another amazing avenue. Maybe I can explore that a little more." That started opening up more and more. And then lifestyle kind of turned into the same thing.

Travel ebbs and flows. Obviously, with the COVID era, the travel window was very, very shut. And I like people, I like ideas, I like concepts. That's pretty much all you need to be a lifestyle writer, so that was more of a side shift than a belly flop. With all those things, what was really interesting, and something I'm only realizing in retrospect, is, I shifted gears without fully understanding what I was shifting to. And then once I achieved the title, I suddenly had to work backward and be like, "What do I want this to mean? How do I want to chase this? What does it look like for me as the writer that I am?"

I'm grateful that circumstances made me change lanes, open up my view, and figure that out. But it was also hard having to realize I have to take ownership and responsibility for all these sudden new projects. That's something I only really rectified when I started calling myself a writer, period, end of sentence, because, well, a writer is all those things.

What you're saying about having to learn it backward, on the go, reflects my own transition out of primarily doing music journalism. You talk about the wages, the fewer opportunities—I had to go where I could make a living and then figure out, while being in my new field, how do I do this? In a way, you can get so much more agency out of that.

Totally. I have people, mainly on Instagram, sending me DMs like, "How do I get into your line of work?" I want to be helpful, but every writer is so different. I'm like, "Your journey is probably not going to look like mine." I feel like I always send people away a little empty-handed when they ask that question because I'm like, "I don't know what to tell you. Start writing. See where it leads."

At our core, writers do want to be helpful, at least to a certain extent. We love communication. We love people. We love connecting ideas. But there's a missing link in describing what we do.

I would say that more of your work these days is travel and lifestyle, but you still photograph concerts. I'm curious to what extent you've decided you want to keep music in the wheelhouse and why that's felt necessary for your creativity.

The very simple answer is I like music and I want to play. Photography is something that was foisted on me. I took classes in college and hated them. I had a very good professor, but he had my brother as a student, and my brother is a very talented professional photographer. There was always that comparison game, and the teacher leaned into that.

I shied away from photography for a long time, and I got an invitation to a festival in Poland, and *Under the Radar* said, "You need to take your own photos." I very begrudgingly got in the pit and did not love the photography bit for a long time, but I was like, "This will get me to go places and do things." I was sort of addicted to that adrenaline.

Five or six years ago, I stopped calling myself a writer with a camera and started calling myself a photographer, and owning that title changed the game. It was like, suddenly, I don't get to just luck into a photograph. I have to figure out why it's good, why I like it, and how to do it again. As soon as that clicked for me, I fell in love with photography. It's fun! It's another form of storytelling at heart, and concert photography—although I do plenty of other kinds of photography—is the funnest of the fun because it happens very fast. You only get one shot at it. You can't ask the musician, [are you] going to run across the stage again?

Either you're going to win spectacularly and get that shot...or you can fail your own expectations and come away with a bunch of blurry shots and be like, "What do I do with this?" I'm an average human being in that I don't like the idea of failure, but suddenly, these are stakes that I embraced.

I don't make money on concert photography. I could probably buy you lunch with the money I've made off concert photography in the last two years, but I still love it for the original reasons. It gets me places.

The thing I hear currently in our conversation is the merit of honing the title, like, "writer, period, end of sentence," and also "photographer."

Yeah. I'm a multihyphenate, which, the first time someone called me that, I almost vomited from the weirdness. It's like, what? I can do these things? It took adding "podcast producer" to those titles to make me believe it.

On that note, when I first met you, I wasn't aware of you having any interest in, or skills with, podcasts, but you worked on Why Not Both? until its hiatus at the end of last year. I'm curious how you decided this would be part of your journey.

Pam [Shaffer] had been producing [the podcast] on her own and interviewing her friends. It was great—"Here are my friends who do multiple things," very homegrown, very fun. She interviewed me, which was both fun and horrifying. ... I was really taken with how good of an interviewer she is, being a therapist and a musician, and being able to make those connections in real-time that I tend to only make when I'm sitting there looking at my transcript.

It was 2019, and it was on a whim, and she had done 10 episodes earlier that year, and I said, "Hey, [do] you want to bring *Why Not Both?* back? I could produce it for you." Just being like, "I like storytelling. You tell stories. Let's see if we can partner." She said yes, not really knowing what that would mean. We had the beginnings of our first season and then 2020 happened, which gave me a lot of free time and a lot of anxiety. I was pairing that free time and anxiety and being like, I'll learn podcasting. [Pam] became an even more incredible host than she already was. I became a better story editor than I was, and with our powers combined, we've had some incredible shows.

On Instagram, I've seen you move toward not just photography but original content like slideshows and graphics. I'm curious if you can talk about that as it pertains to developing, improving, enhancing, and shifting your creative process.

I know it's not a cool opinion, but I love Instagram. [I] definitely love it more than Twitter [and] Facebook. I'm dipping my toe into TikTok and feeling very old, but at some point, I'm going to master that language.

If someone gave me a physical gallery and said, "There's no overhead cost. Fill this with whatever you want. You can turn on a dime. You can try different things. You can do original content, you can do slideshows," I would fill that thing constantly. I have my own space and I can decorate the walls any way I want. That's how I feel about Instagram. Obviously, I've gotten caught up in, how many followers do I have? Do they like my recent posts? I try to pull myself away from that mentality, but it's there sometimes.

I love that I can use Instagram to practice storytelling in whatever way works in the moment. A lot of times, I'll use it to hash out story ideas before I write the story, add little behind-the-scenes facts, or be indulgent in my daily stories and show you my cat. If I wasn't in the job I was in, I wouldn't be as fascinated with Instagram, because you don't need to see my daily life. When I'm home, I tend to not post. I would say any journalist who's interested in multimedia storytelling should play around with Instagram whether or not you're trying to amass a following, whether or not you're trying to do something polished, because the delete button exists for a reason, and that's totally legit to use.

That's all I wanted to ask you today, but if there's anything you want to say about creativity or that you want to add to any of the questions I already asked, go for it.

I really hate Nike because the first words that came to my head were, "Just do it." Losing my fear of what I create not matching what's in my head has made it so much easier to just plunge forward. I have so many people to thank for that. Just working consistently has made it easier to work. Working with Pam and collaborating and seeing her approach of, just, "We're going to get this done," has really helped loosen me up.

We need a better slogan than "Just do it." We're going to have to workshop that. "Get messy." There we go.

Laura Studarus Recommends:

Five books that have challenged me as a working creative:

Why Fish Don't Exist by Lulu Miller. I think we should all be so clever with our nonfiction narratives, and taking comfort in the idea of entropy is a new concept to me. Fun fact! She is one of the few people in recent memory who I interviewed and actively got nervous about because she is so good at her craft. Bonus for anyone is, listen to *Radiolab*, which she produces. Big fan.

Bird by Bird by Annie Lamott. Love this book. I think it confirmed a lot of what I know about the creative process, and it also challenged me in other ways to be kinder to myself while trying to write and create. I think kindness is something we all need a little bit more of.

You Are a Badass at Making Money by Jen Sincero. I've read it three times. I think, as working creatives, money is something that we are all super hesitant to talk about 'cause it's kind of a joykill, and one thing this book taught me is that money doesn't have to be a joykill. We should talk about it. We should talk about how it functions in society and the power it can create, and realize that it's not as inaccessible as we're painting it to ourselves. This book really helped me reconsider my pricing and how I present myself as a professional who needs money for food and rent, and I think that's a really important lesson.

Walking on Water by Derrick Jensen. He makes this really incredible argument that, in order to write, you have to live your life well, and what does that mean? The fact that the answer to that isn't prescriptive, it widely varies from writer to writer and person to person—respecting that is really, really powerful.

Creative Quest by Questlove. Honestly, anytime someone as wildly accomplished as Questlove in so many different varieties wants to tell me something about the way my brain works, I'm going to listen. It's really that simple, and I think he does a beautiful job breaking down some abstract concepts, and honestly—yes, Questlove. Yes across the board.

Name

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Vocation

writer, photographer, podcast producer, travel content creator


Fact

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