

THE CREATIVE INDEPENDENT

On finding your voice

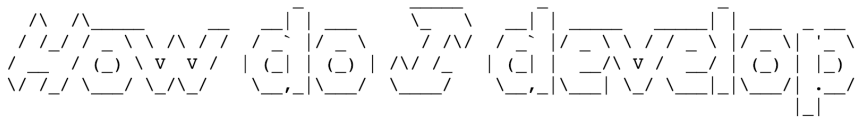
IN THIS ISSUE

Writers Lynne Tillman and Chelsea Hodson on what it means to “find your voice,” rapper Fat Tony on always looking for better ways to express yourself, writer Hermione Hoby on finding your path, artist Angela Pilgrim on creating work in your own voice, plus working artists’ insights on finding your calling, being true to yourself, not overthinking things, letting process lead the way, following your curiosity, and more.

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On finding your voice

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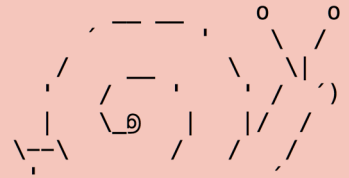
The Creative Independent is a resource.

Our goal is to feed and grow the community of people who create. We publish interviews, wisdom, and guides that illuminate the trials and tribulations of living a creative life, as told by working artists—including writers, musicians, designers, visual artists, and others.

The Creative Independent's logo is a spiral. We like spirals because they're about circling back to a core idea over time, something all creative people must do. As Julia Cameron puts it in *The Artist's Way*, "You will circle through some of the issues over and over, each time at a different level. There is no such thing as being done with an artistic life. Frustrations and rewards exist at all levels on the path. Our aim here is to find the trail, establish our footing, and begin the climb."

While our logo is a spiral, our mascot is a snail. We like snails because of their spiral-shaped shells, and because they excrete slime. The slime helps a snail glide over abrasive terrain, and also creates a map of the snail's path through time. Tracing a snail's trail makes us wonder, *Where is the snail now? And where was it going in the first place?*

What you hold in your hands now is a publication focused on **finding your voice**, compiled from The Creative Independent's archive. We hope it helps you glide a bit more smoothly as you forge your own creative path.



How did you find your voice as an artist?

Answered by writer and cultural critic Lynne Tillman

FINDING VS WORKING

The word "find" or "finding" is a question to me.

There is nothing to find. It is not waiting there, whatever you think it is, for you.

The way it happens for each writer or artist isn't the same. I wanted to be a writer from the age of eight. I wrote two compositions and loved doing it. I knew I could be good at this, even great, and if that doesn't sound modest, it's because it wasn't. But that's what this little girl felt. She was driven.

Something about doing it occupied me completely. I was happy doing this thing. I read all the time. I thought about writing. About books.

At a certain moment, in my late 20s, I started to know or consider or think about what I wanted to write seriously. Seriously thinking and writing.

I didn't find anything. I worked toward it.

How did you find your voice as an artist?

Answered by writer Chelsea Hodson

● ● ● SUMMONING YOUR SUBCONSCIOUS

Finding one's artistic "voice" can be endlessly frustrating, because there's no neat solution—it's something we can't touch or even really define. In this way, my own journey has involved a trust in the instinctual part of myself—if I loved something, I went forth in that direction to study it.

In high school, I thought I might become a photographer or a filmmaker, but writing is the only medium where I've been able to express something exactly the way I wanted to. I can slow down time, I can imagine someone else's dreams, I can arrive at some kind of emotional truth that I didn't know was inside me.

If this sounds mystical, it's because it is. The voice that I find to be the "truest" of all is the voice that, when written, I barely even recognize. I summoned it from my subconscious and then forgot that I did. I expect this definition to change over time, but I expect the process to remain the same: through repetition, frustration, and practice, an idea with potential begins to emerge.



Visual artist and teacher **Angela Pilgrim** on creating work in your own voice

In my opinion, creative work is a personal journey. What you may think something is worth may not be what someone else thinks it's worth. Just like psychology and perception, if you feel like your thoughts—or in this case, your creative work—are relevant, that's all you need to keep yourself progressing. That worth may come from life experiences, personal opinion, or outside influences.

Being authentically *you* gives your creative work worth as well. I'm always experimenting, and I'm perfecting the voice in my work; it can sway with the day or mood, but I do know that what I'm creating has worth to me.

My career as an artist has put me in a position where I'm always collaborating with other people, whether it's through

an exchange of ideas or through working on projects together. I have a real need to give back to others, and Fruishun, [the shop for women that I run], gives other creative people a platform to get their name out there as well. I'm very big into “giving back” to the world; Fruishun has to embody that, too. I imagine this expanding even more with time. I envision the brand continuing to grow in that way, as I continue to collaborate with other new voices.

I think it's important to keep a schedule, a ritual even. Usually I can go long periods of time with a routine, then one day something will click and I'll switch it up for a week. I think **allowing for mistakes in your creative work is important. You're allowed to give yourself a break when you need it.** This will include for me: being in nature, being

still in my own space, writing ideas down instead of getting to work on them.

I remember having a burnout where my body made me rest; that tends to happen, too. Stopping yourself and being still really prevents that.

Creative blocks can be indicators to stop taking in too much of the medium you're working in. So when I get creative blocks I do all the above and try to learn a new skill, like a language, or I'll do some reading. My sketchbooks help with my creative blocks, too, because I can go back to something I didn't finish—I can flip back and forth, filling it without commitment.

There was a point when I felt like the work I was making wasn't being expressed as I would've liked. My true voice wasn't being heard in my art. I remember not working on art for a year and a half and wondering what the next step would be. I spent time learning more about myself—the things that made me happy, sad, inspired, hurt, and what I've learned in this brief time on this planet. I thought about my experiences.

When I was growing up, I wasn't as opinionated as I became with age. A lot of

my childhood was like watching a movie. I wasn't completely quiet and just a viewer, but I was quiet enough that I was often interpreted by peers and family. I was born into a family where they were pro-Black and had a sense of pride in it, but didn't speak too much on any issues regarding our real community. The conversation was centered around generational habits of Black culture with no explanation of why.

In my adult years I started exploring these subjects: accomplishments, community pride, food, history, culture, and media in the Black community. This birthed the hair series that I created two years ago. It's a screen-printed series of women of color surrounded by jars of Pomade and the hair grease I grew up using: Blue Hair Magic and Mango Butter. In many ways, they're self-portraits interpreted through strong women of color.

Subjects involving race, beauty, and individuality have a platform today. It's welcomed, which is different from a decade ago. My work's found solidarity with people in my community.

My voice, as an extension of my art, inspires my work tremendously. Art has always been an extension of my voice.

*Excerpted from a longer
conversation; read the
full interview on
thecreativeindependent.com*



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“I heard once that there are three stages in an artist’s search. One is imitation—imitating everything that you think is cool and groovy, and you want to identify with. Then once you imitate, you take those imitations and you experiment with blending and exploring—that’s the second stage. And then the third stage is self-realization and self-discovery. Discovering your own language and your own voice out of all the experimentation and imitation you’ve been working at.”

Musician and mystic Laraaji on meditation and creativity

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/ ON FINDING YOUR CALLING /
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"I think it's worth it to go for big things, because you get to see what you can actually do. It tests your capabilities and expands them. And then it does open up doors, as well. With the career thing, I spent so many years trying to figure myself out. I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do, but I was motivated by wanting to find something that really felt right, and that I could really love. So it was a process of rejection for a while, before eventually falling into film."

Filmmaker Marina Katz on taking time to figure out your path

"It's important to do things that you are scared of doing. For me this has to do with my relationship with swimming and water. When I was little, I could only feel my fear. At a certain point I realized that, actually, I love water. It's just that there are things about it that make my stomach do jumping jacks. What is that feeling? And why do I have it? It's been an important thing for me to do, to not let my fear stop me from experiencing the joys and the pleasures of things. So when it comes to what you fear, maybe allow yourself to try it just a little bit."

Musician Mirah on growing along with your creative practice

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"[Before I knew what slam poetry was,] I had accepted that I was a quiet person. I had accepted that I was shy. But I was longing to be someone else. I just didn't know how to do it, and when I saw [a slam-poetry performance], I was like, 'That is how I can be the person that I want to be. This is who I actually am. And this quiet version of myself is just what other people want me to be. But I have a lot to say.' I knew that immediately. And I remember going home and beginning to write poems."

Poet José Olivarez on having compassion towards your rough drafts

"I was looking at the works of artist Anthony Goicolea when I was in high school, and I had an art teacher say, 'You know, you can do this as a profession.' And I thought to myself, 'Ah, here we go.' Back then I was doing some weird, wacky things, like buying all these cabinet televisions and stacking them on top of one another and photoshopping in sections of my body. So I was already feeling around, but in the end, it was validation from a high school teacher that made me think I could actually be an artist if I wanted to."

Visual artist Mark Dorf on sincerity, balance, and the internet

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✎ ON FINDING YOUR CALLING ✎

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“When I was younger I liked to sing, and things like that, but it wasn’t until I was 15 that I found out about voguing and fell in love with the energy and with the art form. I didn’t do any research about the history of vogue or what it was—I just saw the style and mimicked it. I would show up at the balls to compete and they would tell me, ‘No, that’s not voguing. I don’t know what you are doing.’ So from there, I started doing research and started looking into what is vogue and where it comes from. I basically used voguing as a stress reliever when I was younger, before even knowing what being trans was... with voguing anything I felt I could let out on the floor. It was freedom.”

Dancer, muse, and teacher Leiomy Maldonado on the culture of vogue

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“Creating your own path is the best way to go. I think of someone like Bridget Everett, a hero of mine. She was trying to make it as an actress and a cabaret singer. She has this incredible presence, but she was getting turned down left and right by people saying, ‘You’re too weird, you’re too weird, you’re too weird.’ Finally, she was like, ‘Okay, then I’m gonna be the weirdest.’ You’re too big. You’re too loud. ‘Then I’m gonna be the biggest and loudest.’ And then, look at her now, you know?”

Writer and performer Amanda Duarte on creating your own best role

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/ ON FORGING YOUR OWN PATH /
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“Be confident in what you think and in what inspires you. I think that is really important. I always appreciate that quality in the people I work with, and as a result, I try to give them a lot of liberties. I think it’s cool if people can express their intelligence and creativity and have bold ideas. It seems like such a common-sense thing to say—be bold, have big ideas—but you’d be surprised by how many people don’t.”

Designer Camille Baudelaire on embracing new trends and technologies in your work

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“Even the most masterful artists talk about that—growing and improving and trying to get better. There’s no final, perfect state you ultimately reach—it’s all your own path. But for me, there’s the thing in my head and what I want it to look like, and then actually executing that on the page. It gets easier over time, but sometimes it also gets harder when you’re trying new things. That was always one of the bigger challenges for me.”

Visual artist Alexander Heir on learning the things they don't teach you in school

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✎ ON FORGING YOUR OWN PATH ✎

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"I promise that you will, within the work you're doing, find the rhythm that works for you. But until you do, just keep pushing. Just keep moving, and I promise it will happen. I'm not even trying to be like a life coach. You just truly must keep going. The rest of it will fall into place. Also, drink a lot of water. Take care of yourself."

Comedian Yassir Lester on why you must keep moving

"There's no straightforward path to being an arts critic or journalist. It's something you figure out the hard way over years and years and years of throwing stuff against the wall, hoping something sticks. What I wish somebody had told me is just 'be less worried about what other people think.' Have confidence in your opinions."

Journalist and critic Geeta Dayal on writing as an optimistic act

We asked readers if there was any one idea or piece of advice that's most helped them to develop their own creative practice and voice. *Here's what they said:*

"Seek progress, not perfection."

"Know that it's okay to say no to projects that don't interest you."

"Skip grad school until you know exactly what you want to pursue."

"Start your own thing. Don't wait for power-holders to embrace you."

"Be open to a creative life that looks different than the way you may have pictured it."

"Find someone whose career you want to emulate and ask them to mentor you. They'll probably say yes."

"I wish I had also known that we are all just figuring it out as we go, and there




is no point where everything is perfect.”

“A lifetime of art making is actually a very long time. You have to pace yourself and build structures to sustain your practice over the years.”

“Know that it’s never too late to begin. I started my creative practice in my 40s, with no degree and no background in the arts. I’m glad I finally did.”

“Trust yourself. If you get a bad feeling about someone, don’t work with them. If you get a good feeling about someone, work your hardest. It pays off.”



“Make connections with your peers, and with those who share your interests. Even if the wider world ignores you, that immediate community will sustain you.”

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“If you find something that truly inspires you, bow down to it. Respect it. Love it. Cherish it. But then allow for your own interpretation of what that means. Maybe you’ll discover through music that you’re actually a painter, so maybe you should do that instead of trying to be a rock star. Maybe you’re something else.”

Musicians Beach House on creating your own world

“As writers, you [must] trust your own voice. A lot of people write and think, ‘The public will like this,’ or, ‘This will be important,’ but you are your first reader. The first person that has to be impressed with what you’re writing is you. You always have to remember that.”

Poet Nikki Giovanni on trusting your own voice

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✓ ON BEING TRUE TO YOURSELF ✓

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"I tried to write some prose and my friend who's a prose writer told me it didn't sound like me. He was like, 'That's just not you.' And I started to think about it and I realized that he was right. Maybe there are modes where a person fully opens into their voice and into their self, and other modes where they're constrained in some way."

Poet Matthew Rohrer on challenging your own process

"When I was doing music, I always felt like I was really trying very hard. I was doing visual art on the side just to enjoy myself, so I did all these performances to do something that was somehow total freedom. That's the great thing [about the art world]: you can be absolutely free to do whatever you want. It just has to be some kind of a personal truth."

Visual artist and part-time musician Ragnar Kjartansson on finding the right kind of ambition

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“I think that the goal for any artist is ultimately just to express yourself as honestly as possible. What is my true expression? I’m trying to create exactly what I see from my eyes—whether it’s in a film, whether it’s a role I’m acting, whether it’s a line drawing, whether it’s a song, anything. I just want it to be specific to my own voice, because I think the more specific something is, the more other people relate to it.”

Actress Alia Shawkat on craving different creative outlets

“You have to listen to your inner voice no matter what. People love my early work now. At the time [I was making it], nobody could see it. I’m glad I didn’t destroy that. I lived through being eviscerated by the art world, but what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, right? You have a point of view that makes you unique. You’ll be able to see and say things that no one else will be able to see and say.”

Visual artist Marilyn Minter on listening to your inner voice

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"This music that I make every day, this ambient music, is really from a place of pure intuition, and that's also part of my practice with this art form as a part of my life. I tend to live my life in a very intuition-based way. If I feel really, truly inside of me and around me that there are forces telling me 'yes' or 'no' about something, I can't go against whatever that feeling is. That's what's led me to where I am now, every decision I ever made."

Musician Emily A. Sprague on being guided by intuition

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“I [tend to] overthink everything, so over-editing is always a concern for me. It’s something I struggled with a lot as a younger writer, but the older I’ve gotten the more patient I’ve allowed myself to be with my process. I’m better at recognizing when it’s time to step away from something if it’s not working, and more generous in giving myself space to forget about a project until I feel I have something new to add or enough distance to view it more objectively.”

Poet Andrew Weatherhead on hijacking language

“Making my zine was a place to test out identity, voices, and sensibilities. But looking back, I think what I cherish about that time is that I would stay home at night and do something for no real reason other than that I wanted to do it. There were no readers, nobody was asking me to make a zine. And yet these were things I was interested in—things that I wanted to learn more about. I’ve tried to approach my career similarly.”

Writer Hua Hsu on finding the time, space, and voice you need to write

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✎ ON NOT OVERTHINKING THINGS ✎

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“Writing for me is like very elegant shitting. It’s involuntary. It just comes out of me. It’s how I get through the day. I don’t always do the kind of writing I want to do. Or I don’t always put words down the way I want to, in the shape I want to... But I always keep multiple notebooks. I’m always planning for the next time that I can do the kind of writing I want to do. It’s just very mixed up with everything else in my life.”

Writer and artist Sarah Gerard on understanding your subject

“When I do a remix, I don’t overthink it like, ‘What am I going to do with this?’ It’s more organic. We start working on the drums, the bass, building up the rhythm, and then we see where it goes. Sometimes you have a vision in your head, of course, of how you want it to sound. Or a direction, or an inspiration, as to what the flavor of the mix will be. But, like DJing for me, I don’t know what’s gonna happen at the end of it: You walk into a club at night and you don’t know what’s going to happen. It could be a total disaster, or it could be the greatest night of your life. That’s the thrill of it all.”

DJ and producer Justin Strauss on sticking with it

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“My biggest thing is that I don’t create work for anything in particular. I’m constantly making and then, later on, I’ll assign pieces to a particular show. It’s better for me when I don’t know where a work’s going because otherwise I start thinking about people in that city who might see it and the expectations around it. I much prefer creating with nothing on the line. That’s the best: no pressure.”

Visual artist Petra Cortright on having the confidence to create anything you want

“I’m working more slowly now. When I would pencil things I could just go in and was basically tracing the lines and it was really fast. Now it’s painstakingly slow, but that feels better and more cathartic. I spend 24/7 with my brain going a mile a minute, and me working more slowly is me retraining myself to think more slowly or in a more deliberate way. I feel less scattered and psycho and chaotic.”

Visual artist Heather Benjamin on challenging yourself in your work

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✓ ON LETTING PROCESS LEAD THE WAY ✓

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"I'm so frequently unhappy with my own output and what I make of that failure is a really crucial part of my creative process. Everyone who has that crippling sense of dissatisfaction at all times knows that it is so, so powerful. My big failures allow for me to look at and fine tune my process. One time, I didn't book a show that I had a really good shot at making, and I really wanted to get that job. I thought, 'Why didn't I get that job? Oh, because I'm not that great at acting on camera.' So, I started taking on-camera acting classes, and I felt a lot better."

Comedian Mitra Jouhari on learning what you can and can't control

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"[Now that I'm older,] I'm more willing to trust whatever my process is. I had to learn that it's OK not knowing in the beginning exactly what you are writing. In the past I would get frustrated and feel like I was beating on a door that wouldn't open, but now I'm more like, 'Well, let's see where this goes.' It may take weeks before I understand what a piece is trying to be."

Songwriter and author Rosanne Cash on trusting your process

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✓ ON LETTING PROCESS LEAD THE WAY ✓

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"When you write you could make any world possible within the form of language. That actually terrifies me. There is a sort of deliberateness to the way I think when I'm working. I have an idea and I just follow it wherever I want to, wherever it needs to go. That feels like a kind of freedom. I can see how my process has allowed me to end up in different places, and it makes sense it retrospect. In the moment—and when looking into the future—it doesn't always make sense, but that's okay."

Visual artist Jeanine Oleson on the pleasure of making things

"I needed to approach it all these different ways and have all of these failed experiments in order to get to the place where I could feel like, 'Oh, this is actually the way I want to be doing this.' Sometimes it takes a while to get there."

Writer Carmen Maria Machado on writing about whatever you want

How do I forge my own path as an artist?

Answered by writer Hermione Hoby

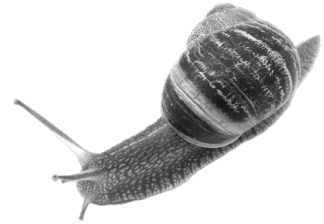
I suspect this comes down to the not-at-all-easy thing of knowing yourself, and asking what the kind of work you want to make looks like, and what kind of work is completely honest to you. If you can answer that question and then invest in that, disregarding everything else, then ego falls away, and you can proceed from a place of sincerity. And, not to sound hopelessly wafty and mystical, but when you do that I really do think opportunities just come to you.

I'd also caution against any kind of mindset of seeking permission, because good writing, or any good kind of art, has to come from the self in all its unanswerable weirdness and awkwardness and vulnerability—rather than from any kind of notion of what other people might want your stuff to be, or what

your work “should” be. If there's too much of the latter, the work will be hollow.

You just have to do your thing and calmly adopt a position of “fuck the narrative” for what that thing should be. In terms of writing, it's wonderful to get to publish at established outlets with solid reputations, but we're also lucky to live in a time when a fantastic essay, for example, might gain huge traction just by being circulated on Twitter. Self publish! The good stuff so often rises to the top. Obviously every artist wants their work to reach people, but there is such a difference between the “success” of external approbation and then making things you believe in and are proud of. Isn't it better to make something fantastic that deeply resonates with like, three people, than to

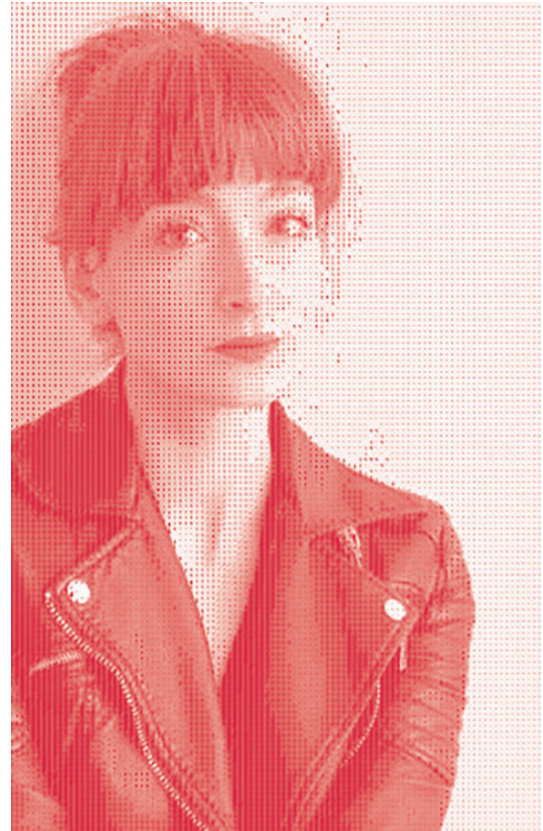
put out something crappy, something you feel eh about, that gets a wider audience?



But to be a bit more practical. Just go see/hear the kind of people whose work means something to you. Again, not the artists you're "meant" to love, but the ones that you actually do. Be open and curious, and let humility be a tool. Don't seek connections with people in terms of what they can do for you, but in terms of what you might learn from them. I'm a fan of the fan letter: by which I mean, it can just be a good spiritual practice to let people know when their work meant something to you.

Forget about success in the way we talk about it, it will only slow you down as an artist. Art is kind of the opposite, that's why we need it.

Excerpted from a longer article. Read the full answer at thecreativeindependent.com



Three pieces of advice for new musicians

Excerpted from a longer guide written by musician Katie Alice Greer, with illustrations by Qiong Li.


1. Be honest with yourself and open to failure.

What do you want to do with your music? No seriously, be honest with yourself. Maybe write it down so you can articulate what its purpose is in your life. Don't hide anything, you're the only one seeing this. You must always be honest with you. You'll need a strong sense of what you truly want in order to develop a plan.

Take risks. Be brave. Put yourself out there even if you're worried it won't work out. It often won't. But the times where it doesn't are actually more valuable internally than the times when it does work out, because failure is the best teacher. People who don't fail don't grow.

2. Perfect = false, and grow a thicker skin.

You're going to mess up sometimes in any sense of the word and that's okay. Creatively, perfection is a no-no. I've heard that Maya Deren was vocally critical of the Western idea of "perfection"—she said she'd prefer to be Ultimate, not Perfect. Don't try to be perfect, how boring and status quo, you know? Be ultimate.



You are absolutely going to need a thick(er) skin. You are protecting precious cargo and sometimes that means hearing “no,” “we’re going to pass,” or simply silence, which can be worst of all. If hearing “no” or being ignored makes you fall to pieces, practice this (putting yourself in situations where you might be rejected) like you would an aerobic activity. Hear “no” more often. You’ll live.

3. Make things you love.

Know that if you do music professionally, you need to have a dual mindset—[one half of your brain has to be no-nonsense], and the other half must be for complete love of what you’re creating. Never make something you don’t love. Be romantic about it, you know? Be the opposite of a realist. Make shit that you get lost in.

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"I talk to [my students] about being gluttons, but in a good way. They should consume everything that is in their path. That is the way to their greatness. That kind of gluttony. That kind of insatiable desire. Not to be famous necessarily, and not to be successful, but to learn and to do something important to oneself."

Visual artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons on letting the world be your studio

"For me, studio time is also about reading and looking at things. I might spend a couple weeks just reading something or looking through images or doing image searches or going to museums and thinking in front of great paintings. And then at some point I start to get back to my own ideas and how they can form into something that has meaning for me."

Visual artist William Villalongo on discovering materials that mean something to you

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✎ ON FOLLOWING YOUR CURIOSITY ✎

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"I think it's good to have a wide-ranging collection of books, so you're not just reading books about music, but you're also reading novels. You're reading fiction; you're reading poetry. It expands your vocabulary to read poetry, to read literature, to read books about cinema or books about architecture. That all inspires me in some way when I write about music. My knowledge base and my perspectives aren't just coming from looking up stuff online or reading books about music. It's coming from reading widely across a wide array of subjects."

Journalist Geeta Dayal on writing as an optimistic act

"Reading books is the only way I can learn things. I read like 20 books at once, and a big part of my writing is just reading. I learn new forms, new structures; how I want to sound. Just breaking down ideas of poetics for me. Then I integrate it into my poetry; things I love, things I'm particularly inspired by in that moment."

Poet Precious Okoyomon on finding poetry in everything

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"I love going to museums. I love to ride my motorcycle. I go to many spiritual places out of curiosity. I really don't follow anything specifically. A lot of it is just discovery. I'm lured by my gut. My gut says, 'Do this,' and I pay attention to that. All of a sudden I will have a thought and I stop what I'm doing and I either jot it down or I flat out stop everything I'm doing and seek out whatever it is. That thing, the fact that it landed in my mind, I ask: 'Is there a message?'"

Musician Draco Rosa on creativity as a path to resurrection

"I think one of the most invigorating things you can do as a creative person is to take a class. This year I'm taking a storytelling class and a pottery class. Last year I took an improv class. It's invigorating to always continue to learn and think, especially when it's something that is not directly related to your own work. You end up making unexpected connections."

Creative Director Piera Gelardi on not being afraid of a blank slate

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✓ ON FOLLOWING YOUR CURIOSITY ✓

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"My interests are in music, fashion, and art, which I've consumed all my life. I think obviously these have something to do with my work now, but it's never been contrived. I don't brainstorm next steps, that is extremely contrived for me. That's something you do a lot of in advertising, where you sit down and cook up as many ideas as creatively possible, then pick the unanimous best one. What I love about what I am doing now is allowing creativity to happen organically."

Visual artist Ash Ghazali on the challenges and joys of being an artist

"Sometimes I talk to a student and I get a sense that they just aren't curious about the world. There's no teaching that. Without curiosity about the world, what are you going to make next? Curiosity is the one requirement. I have noticed this getting harder as I get older because you can get stuck in certain habits. It's also about being jaded. I find myself thinking, 'What is going to surprise me?' So much is going to surprise you."

Visual artist Ryan McNamara on choosing to be an artist



Rapper **Fat Tony** on always looking for better ways to express yourself

I like being in a zone that's free. I think the best zone to be in is to feel the way you felt when you were a child doing stuff. Like my zone for making music is to feel like I'm 18 and graduating high school. 'Cause that was a point in my life where I was young enough to still be a kid and have my imagination go wild and really dream wildly, but also feel like, "Yo, I'm kind of an adult, I have ownership of myself, I have the agency to do what I wanna do." And that zone is perfect. I think as you get older, some of the stereotypical mindsets of being older kind of close you in and take you away from the parts of yourself that make you wanna be a wild kid.

I listen to the stuff that I love today and that I've always loved, things that made me feel

like myself early on. I listen to albums like Prince's *Dirty Mind*, which when I heard that in high school, I was like, "Wow, this music right here means more to me than anything else that I've heard before." Or when I heard songs like "Murder" by UGK, which I hear and I'm like, this makes me feel freaking alive, from the rhyming to the beat. I see myself in this and it just reminds me of being young and alone in my bedroom listening to this stuff loudly and being happy. Being happy with the validation and nothing else. Not caring who's paying attention, not caring what they think, totally closed off and being more than content with myself. That's my favorite zone.

One thing that [Miles Davis] said was that it takes a long time to sound like yourself,

and I think that's really true. In our age, we've been kinda taught that the artist is best at the first thing they do. I call it the *Illmatic* effect: Nas' *Illmatic* was his first album ever, and it's supposedly the best hip-hop album of all time. I think that that gets put into the mindset of fans, that the early stuff is their best.

But what Miles Davis said I think is true for more artists. As you progress and you get older and you try different things, you find better ways of expressing yourself, and you get to edit yourself and get to the thing that you really wanna do with your art. I called [my latest] album *10,000 Hours* 'cause I feel like I'm getting closer to the best version of myself as a musician.

I think it's a process that doesn't really have a set end. There's no time I'm gonna know that I've finally reached it. Maybe that'll be an album that's super critically acclaimed or whatever, but I think it's more so about being yourself. Every piece of music I make, I feel like I'm able to express a different part of myself that's more of the inner me. And it makes me really happy, it keeps me excited about making music. I always feel like I can

make a better song every time, or a better album, really, or give a better performance.

That's what keeps me excited: that I have room to get tighter. Even right now, I'm thinking about my next album. My album ain't even a month old yet, and from the first week that it came out, even before it came out, I was already thinking of what I want my next album to be. What can I do better than I did on this album, and what can I do differently?

When I'm writing [music], I just try to make sure every word counts. That I'm not just giving you filler. I think I'm more conscious of my voice than [I used to be]. In the past I feel like I was just focused on the words, and that would lead me to sometimes sounding kind of stiff in my recordings, just sounding very bare and not like I'm totally into it. I've become more aware of that over time and I wanna make sure that my voice is matching what I'm trying to get across, 'cause that's half the battle. I think when you're a rapper and you're a writer, you can get so trapped into the words that you forget that you gotta really sell it with your voice.

I heard this podcast called *The Chunk...* I was kinda obsessed with it for a little bit,

but there's an episode with Chris Rock and he was showing them his notepad that he keeps on stage when he's performing. And one of his notes to himself was "energy," which sounds really basic. But he was saying that he writes that because he wants to remind himself that he has to sell the performance, even now. Even though he's extremely famous and well off and has been a successful comedian for a very long time, he still believes that he has to go in there and give it his all and that's kinda what I'm telling myself when I'm in the studio now. Before I would just focus on putting out the best writing possible, now I wanna sell it every time.

Excerpted from a longer conversation; read the full interview on thecreativeindependent.com



Exercise: How to articulate your voice in an artist statement

Excerpted from a longer guide to crafting a clear and compelling artist statement, written by Sarah Hotchkiss with illustrations by Beena Mistry.

First, gather your art [or writing, or music, or whatever it is that you make] in one digital or physical space and really look at it. It's possible you've been working on such a micro level you haven't taken a macro view in a while. What commonalities and differences do you see?

EXERCISE 1

Write out a list of adjectives that describe your work. Use both visual and tonal descriptors. Be specific and avoid jargon. If your art follows in the footsteps of minimalism, could you describe it as quiet? Or rhythmic? Is your work funny, raunchy, messy?

EXERCISE 2

Record yourself describing your art to a friend, family member, or fellow artist. Chances are you're making statements about your work all the time. Have a studio visit coming up? Record the conversation (with the other person's permission), transcribe the audio, and mine it for pertinent details.

EXERCISE 3

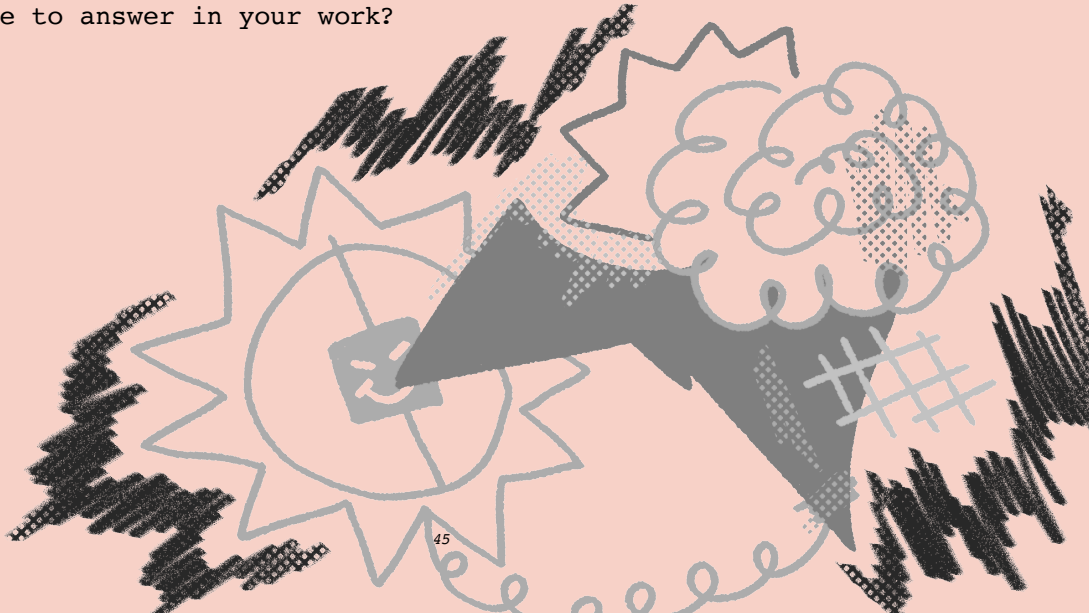
Think about the emotions and reactions you want your audience to come away with when interacting with your work. An artist's intent may have little bearing on an audience's interpretation, but an artist statement is one of the few places you get to nudge that audience towards your desired result. Do they learn something from your art or make new connections between disparate subjects? Are you trying to make people feel agitated, joyful, incensed?

EXERCISE 4

Write a casual letter to your best friend about what you've been up to in the studio. "Dear Laurie, today I spent five hours papier-mâché-ing a cardboard version of a hamster toy. It came out looking like a first-grader's craft project, but that's what I was going for. I think it'll make you laugh."

EXERCISE 5

Jeopardy your practice. What are the questions you hope to answer in your work?



Artist statement basics

After completing one or more of the exercises on the previous page, you should have a bunch of words describing your art. Now you get to pick the best ones to fulfill the very basic elements of an artist statement: what, why, and (possibly) how.

What.

Make sure to state what medium you work in (paintings, sculptures, installation, non-narrative video, durational performance, etc.). It's amazing how many statements don't include that basic fact.

Why.

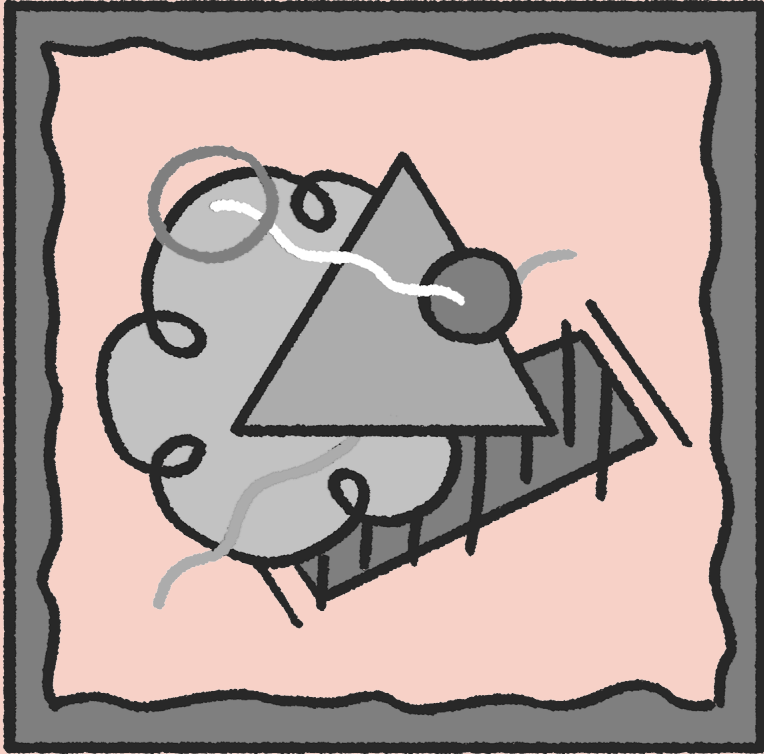
Try not to overthink this one. Look back at your brainstorming and your casual conversations. You make this work because you're excited about it. What, exactly, are you excited about? Be confident: Your art shouldn't "hope" or "try" to do something, it should just do it. Here is where you can also bring up, without going too far into the weeds, your influences and inspirations.

How.

If you have a truly unique process that's important to understand—or one that images can't accurately convey—briefly describe how you make your work.

Beyond fulfilling these basic "what, why, and how" requirements, an artist statement can be relayed in whatever tone and sentence structure feels best to you.

And that's it! Really!



A few recommendations that may help you get to know yourself better



- Take a train ride across the United States.
- Everybody has to go to Paris. I don't care what happens, you have to go to Paris. Because it's Paris dammit and you have to go.
- It would be good to take the Freedom Trail at some point. For everybody, black and white. I think it's important to see how we evolved.
- You need to eat one thing that you never thought you would eat. I don't care what it is. I don't think that I would eat dog, because dogs are our friends. But you have to go someplace and try that one thing that you haven't tried.
- It's good just to fall in love. You know, [even] recognizing it's not going to last.

– Poet Nikki Giovanni on trusting your own voice



- Matching best-friend tattoos
- Coffee
- Signature catchphrases and/or poses to rely on in moments of distress or confusion
- Taking awhile to get to know people
- Never changing your avatar

– Writer and filmmaker Darcie Wilder on finding your voice online



- Have your tools with you. I always have my laptop or my notebook with me, at all times. If you want to be a writer, carry a backpack, whatever, but keep your tools on you.
- Find your bible. What I mean by that is, everybody has a book that sets the bar for them, in terms of what perfection is. For me, at this particular juncture of my life, it's *Salvage the Bones*, by Jesmyn Ward. To me, that is the closest book I've read to perfection, maybe in my life. That is my bar. That's the thing: we all need to make sure we have our bar.
- Have a routine. W. H. Auden, the poet, says that to discipline your passion is to discipline your time. That means that if you really want it to become a part of your life, then you gotta create a routine. Don't make excuses for yourself. Excellence is a habit, everything is a habit.
- Other art. Good writers cannot spend their lives only reading, no matter what anybody says. Reading is a part of it, a huge part of it, right? But the truth is, the real gift in being an artist is experiencing and exploring other art. Be open to movies. Be open to music. Be open to dance and theater. Be open to visual arts. Figure out how to find the narrative in all things.
- Make time to laugh. Writing is a very, very, very, lonely, lonely life. You're alone in your thoughts, you're alone in your head, you're alone in your home, in your office, wherever you are. And so, it is imperative for your mental state, and your ability to continue to make work, that you find time to laugh with other people, and to laugh with yourself.

– *Writer Jason Reynolds on being human in your work*

APPENDIX

NAME	HTTP://THECREATIVEINDEPENDENT.COM/
Camille Baudelaire	people/designer-camille-baudelaire-on-embracing-new-trends-and-technologies-in-your-work/
Beach House	people/beach-house-on-creating-your-own-world/
Heather Benjamin	people/heather-benjamin-on-challenging-yourself-in-your-work/
María Magdalena Campos-Pons	people/visual-artist-maria-magdalena-campos-pons-on-letting-the-world-be-your-studio/
Rosanne Cash	people/musician-rosanne-cash-on-trusting-your-process/
Petra Cortright	people/visual-artist-petra-cortright-on-having-the-confidence-to-create-anything-you-want/
Geeta Dayal	people/journalist-geeta-dayal-on-writing-as-an-optimistic-act/
Mark Dorf	people/mark-dorf-on-sincerity-balance-and-the-internet/
Amanda Duarte	people/writer-and-performer-amanda-duarte-on-creating-your-own-best-role/
Fat Tony	people/rapper-fat-tony-on-being-able-to-sell-it-every-time/
Piera Gelardi	people/creative-director-piera-gelardi-on-not-being-afraid-of-a-blank-slate/
Sarah Gerard	people/sarah-gerard-on-understanding-your-subject/
Ash Ghazali	people/visual-artist-ash-ghazali-on-the-challenges-and-joys-of-being-an-artist/
Nikki Giovanni	people/nikki-giovanni-on-trusting-your-own-voice/
Katie Alice Greer	guides/advice-for-new-musicians/
Alexander Heir	people/visual-artist-alexander-heir-on-learning-the-things-they-dont-teach-you-in-school/
Hermione Hoby	wisdom/hermione-hoby-on-creating-your-own-path/#1
Chelsea Hodson	approaches/question-how-do-i-find-my-voice-as-an-artist
Sarah Hotchkiss	guides/how-to-write-an-artist-statement/
Hua Hsu	people/hua-hsu-on-finding-the-time-space-and-voice-you-need-to-write/
Mitra Jouhari	people/comedian-mitra-jouhari-on-learning-what-you-can-and-cant-control/
Marina Katz	people/filmmaker-marina-katz-on-taking-time-to-figure-out-your-path/
Ragnar Kjartansson	people/ragnar-kjartansson-on-finding-the-right-kind-of-ambition/
Laraaji	people/musician-and-mystic-laraaji-on-meditation-and-creativity/
Carmen Maria Machado	people/carmen-maria-machado-on-writing-about-whatever-you-want/
Leiomy Maldonado	people/leiomy-maldonado-on-the-culture-of-vogue/
Yassir Lester	people/comedian-yassir-lester-on-why-you-must-keep-moving/

APPENDIX

NAME	HTTP://THECREATIVEINDEPENDENT.COM/
Ryan McNamara	people/ryan-mcnamara-on-choosing-to-be-an-artist/
Marilyn Minter	people/visual-artist-marilyn-minter-on-listening-to-your-inner-voice/
Mirah	people/musician-mirah-on-growing-along-with-your-creative-practice/
Precious Okoyomon	people/precious-okoyomon-on-finding-poetry-in-everything/
Jeanine Oleson	people/jeanine-oleson-on-the-pleasure-of-making-things/
José Olivarez	people/poet-jose-olivarez-on-having-compassion-towards-your-rough-drafts/
Angela Pilgrim	people/angela-pilgrim-on-creating-work-in-your-own-voice/
Jason Reynolds	people/writer-jason-reynolds-on-being-human-in-your-work/
Matthew Rohrer	people/poet-matthew-rohrer-on-challenging-your-own-process/
Draco Rosa	people/musician-draco-rosa-on-creativity-as-a-path-to-resurrection/
Alia Shawkat	people/alia-shawkat-on-craving-diferent-creative-outlets/
Emily A. Sprague	people/musician-emily-a-sprague-on-being-guided-by-intuition/
Justin Strauss	people/justin-strauss-on-sticking-with-it/
Lynne Tillman	approaches/question-how-do-i-find-my-voice-as-an-artist
William Villalongo	people/william-villalongo-on-discovering-materials-that-mean-something-to-you/
Andrew Weatherhead	people/poet-andrew-weatherhead-on-hijacking-language/
Darcie Wilder	people/darcie-wilder-on-finding-your-voice-online/

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Colophon

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