

Practical advice for new musicians

A guide by Katie Alice Greer with illustrations by Qiong li



The most common conversation I have with other musicians centers around the thesis that, generally speaking, music is in trouble. Musicians aren't getting paid. Creativity is discouraged. People don't have access to vital tools. Streaming, streaming, streaming.

It's true we're in trouble, but haven't we always been? Music and the business of making it is an eternally confounding practice. Creative aspirations and personal needs are constantly shifting, and the landscape is constantly shifting, too. But don't get discouraged. At the risk of painting myself as more zenned-out than I am (I'm not), change is one of the only constants we can depend upon in life. I try to keep that in mind when I'm feeling frustrated, with music or with anything else. Below, I've compiled some thoughts for people in search of guidance related to musical endeavors. I can't guarantee it'll be helpful to you, but I hope it gets you thinking about what it means to be a musician, and more broadly, about what it means to resist the practices harmful to music making and musicians themselves. It is my hope that any of us who love music are thoughtfully invested in cultivating a healthier music landscape—for right now, and for the future.

— Katie Alice Greer



Be honest with yourself about what it's all for.

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. The first book I've finished in the new year is Sheila Chandra's *Organizing For Creative People*. I can't stop raving about it! This first point is influenced by her book.

I said this to a friend last year in an email: *first off (I repeat), THIS IS IMPORTANT TO YOU, so treat it that way. 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. It is so dumb that societally we talk about "failure" in such negative terms. People who don't fail don't grow. Tell people about this music. Ask your friends to engage with it. Share it. When you're bored of this, make more music. This is a project for YOU first and foremost, not them.*

Whether you want to be a financially ambitious career musician or a fairly private, personally fulfilled I-do-it-when-I-feel-like-it musician (or, likely, somewhere in between), never forget that this is for—and about—you.

Have some values, and be loyal to them.

If you're going to be a Financially Ambitious Career Musician for fuck's sake please don't be a throw-anybody-under-the-bus-just-to-get-ahead asshole about it. Understand what loyalty means and how it should and shouldn't play out in your decisions. Have some decency and see the slightly bigger picture of the world, of your community, and your impact on it. Have some personal values that aren't impacted by what you're offered. See the humanity of others outside of what kind of opportunities they represent to you. I don't even have to say this, right?

To quote a recent Meagan Day tweet, "Naked career ambition with no loyalty to a larger political vision seems... lonely." I might add that it seems kinda boring, too. Be led exclusively by naked career ambition and your work will likely suffer.

Another thing: once you're in a position to choose opening bands on a bill, the responsibility to ensure you're paying your openers falls to you. I'm sure somebody is going to email me and remind me of a time where they opened for me and didn't feel appropriately compensated now that I'm bringing this up, but I think it's fucked up when support acts make a

disproportionately small amount in comparison to the headliner's guarantee.

Sure, there are going to be situations where the opener doesn't want their cut of the money and is happy to offer it to the touring band (more often at DIY shows, or when support acts view their music as a hobby), but let's not assume everybody is in a position to turn down money. That's a good way to exclude anybody who isn't financially comfortable. Make sure your support acts are being appropriately compensated.

Get over the idea of perfection, and grow a thicker skin.

This doesn't mean, in your quest to live "right," that you'll be perfect. The world is fucked up and "perfect" is an idea from the fucked up Old World (to borrow a concept from Jonathan Richman). You're going to mess up sometimes and that's okay. Remember from my point above: failure is an excellent teacher and a good friend. Creatively, perfection is also 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. Be nice, be bound by care for your brethren and sistren and personren and futuren and all that.

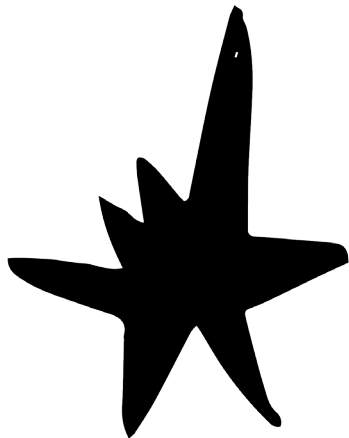


You are absolutely going to need a thick(er) skin. You are protecting precious cargo and sometimes that means hearing "no," "we're going to pass," "the bill is already full," or simply silence, which can be worst of all. What is the quote? "The opposite of love is not hate, it is indifference." Too true (btw, Google tells me Elie Wiesel). You need strong confidence in what you're doing to weather the storms of "no" and indifference. Plus, you're making this hot unexpected shit, right? We can't expect them to get it right away.

You don't want to be made entirely of this thick skin, mind you. If you're all thick skin through and through, what are you even protecting? 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.

Make things you love, and find other people who love what you're making.

More from my email that my friend didn't even want to receive (lol): Know that if you do music professionally, you need to have a dual mindset—one half of your brain is 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. This is the inner fire that will guide you even when shit is otherwise terrible around you and no one seems to care about your work (you'll feel like that often). The OTHER half of your brain has to be no-nonsense, no rose-colored glasses. Get rid of any romantic notions about how music press, audiences, or shows work.

Build up a fan base. Make real connections with people who love your music! Book a lot of shows all over the place. Play to two people, or five people, whatever, and hope that you'll change their life and they'll email you. It's fucking cool that any people are digging your music enough to reach out, it means a lot! Don't you want to talk to them?

Fucking hell please DO NOT hire a publicist until you've built up a fan base. Your publicist WILL NOT build you a fan base. I'm sure everyone's got an example of where this isn't true but by and large, it's absolutely true, and in my humble opinion, a common misconception for inexperienced artists that costs a lot of money and heartache. Connect with as many people as you can via email, in person, whatever, and THEN, once it's really feeling like

you're gonna do it big because you've got this actual THING going on, then you might wanna consider investing in a publicist. They will thank you for this approach, and will be much more likely to produce good work for you.

If you've got nothing going on, no fans and no story line, work on that first. Don't make everybody else's job harder. Publicists aren't going to make music writers excited about you. They will encourage music writers to write about you (once you present yourself as A Thing To Write About), and these writers may or may not bite for any number of reasons.

Pro tip: once you've got a publicist, maybe check in with some writers after you've done an interview with them, to see how they liked working with your publicist.

Be realistic about the music industry, and don't get burned.



Assuming you want to do Career/Professional things: Get a sense of how romantic a view you have of the music industry, and then smash all those rosy notions to pieces. This is the music industry, it is gross and bad (like all industries). Understand that so you can unpack some possibly damaging assumptions. Do you presume "good" music always prevails, eventually garnering enough support for it to float to the top and succeed? Do you think writers simply cover whatever is, to their mind, the "best" of

what they hear, free from editors or publishers who might frown upon their non-click-worthy tastes? (I don't actually know how music writing works so writers don't come for me, I just know they have some bullshit to deal with, too)

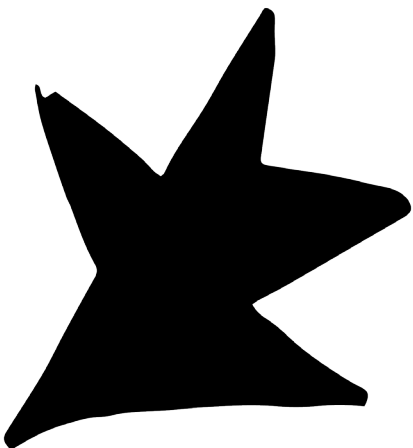
If you come from a DIY or underground, collaborative community, do you think others owe you their support, and resent them when they're not showing up for you? We all come into our respective industries with some naïve notions about How Things Work, and then maybe we get angry and depressed when they don't work that way, and then maybe we insist that well, this is the way it should work, and we may very well be right about that. We might want to keep that in mind as we're working, and try to work with others to make positive changes!

Another thing: don't automatically wrinkle your nose at a contract. Ideally, with the right legal representation, a contract should be a document that makes both parties' responsibilities transparent to both parties, so that there's never any misunderstanding or confusion. I've been burned on this in the past (on both sides), and it sucks when you're getting burned by your friends. You don't have to sign a contract, but don't assume it's a red flag if somebody asks you to consider it.

Just as much as there's a long history of indie labels making good on handshake deals, there's also a sordid history of indie labels being sharky and exploitive with their so-called "handshake" deals. There is also a sordid, and often untold history of artists becoming wildly more successful than the scenes that originally supported them and never supporting those communities/labels in return, though a handshake promised they would. And people wonder why the underground is collapsing on itself. Anyway...

Work with what you've got.

If you need a bigger budget in order to do "it" (whatever "it" is), you're doing it wrong. You need to be creative IN ORDER TO get the bigger budget eventually. Work with what you have. Priests and Sister Polygon didn't start releasing our music on cassette because tapes were the popular medium they've become lately—they've probably become popular because many people were in a similar position for the last 10 years, or so. We did it because wholesale tapes cost like \$0.15/each and we wanted to save up money to put out a 7", which meant we needed to sell something for roughly \$5 at shows for a while.



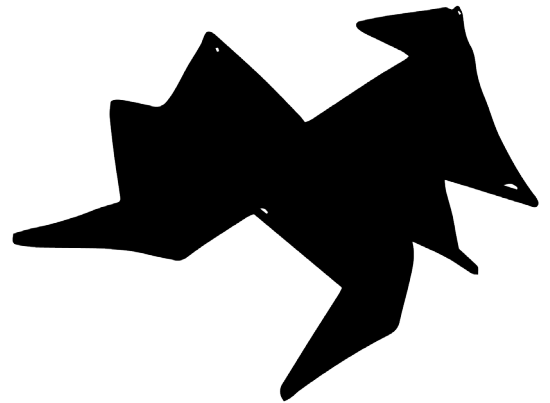
If you do start off doing everything yourself you'll learn a hell of a lot, and you won't have holes in your knowledge bank. When you don't know stuff from experience it means you rely on advice from others, whose priorities may or may not line up with yours. Eventually, when you're like, "I can't do ALL this shit myself, I'll never get anything done," you'll know exactly what types of people you want to hire for these positions.

The music industry, in all genres and sectors, is currently designed to exploit inexperienced and underdeveloped artists as quickly as the crystal ball of the marketplace deems these artists/bands profitable. Please, for the love of god, give yourself enough time to figure out what you're doing (conceptually, musically), what you want to say, and what you want to be about. Once you get going it's a little hard to slow down.

If you feel like you still have more you want to learn before committing to things, make some space for that. (This is course different for everyone, some of us simply have financial obligations we don't have the privilege to stave off, and we're gonna be trying to hop on the money train faster, I get it.)

Advocate for yourself, and don't be afraid to talk money.

Learn how to talk about money without being embarrassed. After you get paid, count your money (privately) before you leave the gig. You know the part in Ladies And Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains where Diane Lane threatens the club promoter with a can opener? Not trying to be an alarmist, we can all hope you never have to do this, but you have to be PREPARED to do this, especially if you're not a cis hetero white guy. It's just the damn truth. Advocate for yourself, stand up for yourself and your worth.



Priests was once invited to co-headline a tour for a lot less money than we deserved, based on our previous ticket sales in the region in similar-sized venues. We sent over proof of how many tickets we'd sold in the past in these venues, what we were financially worth essentially, and the other band's booking agent was able to successfully ask these venues for more money.

Make friends with other bands/ artists, and talk about money. These people are your allies, not competitors. Talk about guarantees, ticket sales, all that stuff. I'll never forget going on tour with Ought for the first time, and their willingness to talk to us about what they were making, what their label was doing for them, what it was like to have a booking agent. It was a huge sigh of relief to talk to another band that was of a similar profile and hear what was going on with them, how our experiences lined up and were different. This will come in handy when festivals book you, and you can ask other friends (who've also been booked for the festival previously) what they got paid.

I don't know, I could probably go on but this is more than enough of my blathering right now. I'm not even a successful musician, do you guys know that? Ask me once I've bought a house for my aunt or a car for myself or something. I don't know shit. What I love about the "music business" (I actually hate it, it's gross) is that it's like a weird Rubik's Cube that's always changing.

STAND UP FOR YOURSELF



Final note: please don't ever champion music if you don't actually love it. I don't care if they're your friends or whatever. Respect the art and just hype shit that you truly love. It's better for you, for them, for everybody.



Katie Alice Greer is a musician, songwriter, regular writer, and a record label owner. Her band Priests released their debut full-length *Nothing Feels Natural* in 2017. She also makes solo music under her initials, KAG. Sister Polygon Records is owned and operated by all four original members of Priests and is based out of Washington, DC.

